

To Find You Again by MuffinLove03

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Summary: Finding her was only the beginning. In a town still vulnerable to inter-dimensional threats and sketchy government agents, it's going to take a lot to keep her safe and bring her home. But he was prepared to do whatever it took. He promised... (Mileven, Jancy)

1. Time After Time

[A/N: Hi all! This is my first Stranger Things fic so I'm a little nervous. But I had several ideas floating around and theories I'm interested in and this was the best thing I could think to do as I patiently (agonizingly) wait for Season 2. Please let me know how I'm doing, if you like it, etc. Thank you!]

Also, I like the way that music can supplement the emotional context of writing so each of my chapters will have a "theme song". You're welcome to listen to the song and see if it puts you in the groove of the chapter or ignore it completely :)

D/C: I don't own Stranger Things. These characters are not mine.]

Chapter 1: Time After Time (by Cyndi Lauper)

"After my picture fades and darkness has turned to grey, watching through windows - you're wondering if I'm okay. Secrets stolen from deep inside, the drum beats out of time,"

.....

The end of the year always seemed to pass by in the blink of an eye, what with so many holidays clustered together. As quickly as Christmas had come, it was gone, and now the small town of Hawkins was making its way toward New Years Eve.

The boys were certainly enjoying the winter break from school, spending most of their time at Mike's house playing Dungeons and Dragons, eating pizza, and otherwise simply hanging out. Everything was almost back to normal, as if Will had never disappeared into the Upside Down. As if the town of Hawkins had never been in a frenzy over the missing Byers boy. As if the events of the past month had never deviated from anything more than predictable suburban small town life and fictional monsters and quests - the key word being "almost".

This was no truer than for Mike who still couldn't bring himself to

tear down the makeshift blanket fort he'd set up for Eleven in his basement. Neither Lucas, nor Dustin, nor Will had the heart to comment on it whenever they'd come over and find it still set up in the corner, Mike's super-com nestled between the pillows.

Things weren't quite the same with Will either, though he'd been doing everything he could to hide the fact that at random times, he would briefly flicker in and out of the Upside Down. The first few times it had happened, he almost considered telling Jonathan. However, he couldn't put aside the thought of worrying either his brother or his mom. Joyce had gotten into the habit of randomly dropping whatever it was she was doing just to hug her young son, reaffirming over and over how much she loved him and how happy she was that he was home. She couldn't savor the moments enough. And that's exactly why Will didn't want to worry her. In the weeks since coming home from the hospital he'd vomited a few slugs which, while alarming, he rationalized as being a side effect of his time in the Upside Down that would eventually subside. The first time he'd flickered into the Upside Down since his home coming was more than a little shocking but over the past couple weeks, he'd grown somewhat used to it and could almost feel the episodes coming on, though he had no control over when or if they happened. He never stayed in the Upside Down for long and at times he wondered if he was only imagining it, like a bad memory that would creep up on him when he least expected it.

This time was different, though. This hadn't been a flicker.

For the majority of their break from school, the boys had set up camp in Mike's basement with long D&D campaigns running every day.

"You find yourself in a swamp," Mike said, setting the scene in a dramatic tone as the boys settled back into gameplay following the arrival of the pizza they'd ordered for dinner. "To the North, you see a house. To the West, you can go deeper into the thick, stinking swamp. The East and South are blocked off by dense growth. Lucas, what is your action?"

"I'm going North," Lucas said definitively. "But slow, and with my sword ready in case we run into something,"

"How deep is the swamp?" Dustin asked as he guided melting cheese into his mouth from the pizza slice in his hand.

"I'm going North, too," Will said, nodding, as he moved his character piece.

"Thick, dirty swamp water comes up to your knees and the mud sucks at your feet with every step," Mike went on, acting out the sounds he was describing. "You-"

"*Mike!*" Mike's mother called down from the kitchen.

Mike deadpanned at the interruption before turning around and yelling, "*What?!*" When she didn't respond, he rolled his eyes, grumbling. "Sorry guys. I'll be right back,"

"Okay," Will nodded pleasantly.

"I'm getting another piece before Dustin eats the whole pizza," Lucas said, getting up from the table and walking over to the couch where the pizza box rested.

"Shut up, Lucas," Dustin said over his shoulder, to which Lucas pushed Dustin's arms, inciting one of their typical shoving matches.

"No, *you* shut up!"

"*No, you!*"

The two continued their play-shoving match as Will felt a familiar nausea settle into his stomach.

"Hey guys," He said, standing up. "I'll be right back,"

Dustin and Lucas barely responded as Will headed to the small half bathroom on the other side of the basement.

Upstairs, Mike stood opposite his mom at the kitchen island as she placed the remains of several cakes into colorful Tupperware containers. Much of the house was still decorated for Christmas and the tree in the living room had several opened gifts resting beneath it.

"What is it?" Mike asked, resting his hands on the island.

"Lucas' mom called," Mike's mom said as she sealed the lid to a container of frosted spice cake. "It's time for him to go home,"

"What?" Mike complained. "But we're in the middle of a campaign!"

His mom stopped what she was doing to shoot him a stern look. "Tell Lucas his mom is waiting for him at home. He can pick back up with you guys tomorrow,"

"But you don't understand," Mike went on. "We can't keep going without him. It throws off the whole-"

"*Michael*," She said, turning to face him directly and Mike sighed.

"Okay, *fine*," He conceded, trudging back downstairs where Lucas and Dustin were still bantering back and forth. "Hey, where's Will?" He said, looking around and noticing the obvious absence of their fourth party member.

Dustin stopped wrestling against Lucas to look around, earning him one last sucker punch to the shoulder. "He was here a second ago,"

"Will?" Mike called, wandering around the basement. "*Will!*"

"You don't think he -" Lucas trailed off as the trio's search became a little more frantic. After all, he'd only just come home a month ago.

"*Shit, shit, shit!*" Dustin muttered to himself as he held his head in his hands, his fingers tugging at his curls in anxiety.

"No!" Mike snapped adamantly, pushing the thought of Will disappearing yet again out of his mind. "He's gotta be arou -"

Without warning, Will appeared before them, crouched in front of the El's old fort.

"What the shit?!" Dustin exclaimed as all three boys did a double-take at their friend.

Will coughed several times before registering the three sets of eyes

locked on him.

"Dude, what was that?" Lucas demanded, his voice a little shaky with concern.

"Will, were you...?" Mike ventured to ask, not sure if he actually wanted his suspicion to be true.

"Yeah," He said quietly, clearing his throat and leaning back against one of the table legs supporting the fort. "For a few minutes,"

Lucas shook his head. "How the hell did you get there?"

"More importantly, how did you get *back*?" Dustin added.

"I don't know," Will shrugged, pulling his knees up to his chest as his friends came closer, kneeling to the ground tentatively as though the slightest wrong move could send Will back into the Upside Down. "It's happened a couple times before but only for a split second and I wasn't sure if I was just imagining it or not," Will's gaze was fixed on the floor in front of him as he did his best to calm down. He was back. He was okay. Somehow repeating those thoughts in his head wasn't enough to comfort him, though.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Mike asked gently.

"I don't know," Will shook his head, his eyes wide as he gathered his bearings. "I thought maybe I was just imagining it, you know? I didn't want to worry anyone if it was just a side effect or something," One minute, he had been standing in front of the toilet in the basement bathroom and the next, he's in the Upside Down. But it was different this time. Rather than a flicker between dimensions, he'd actually stayed in the Upside Down for a few minutes, long enough to wander out of the bathroom and back to the other side of the basement. "I think I saw -"

"What was it like?"

"Are you okay now?"

"What did you see?"

His friends bombarded him with questions at once, further disorienting Will as he turned his gaze to the empty fort beside him. Mike noticed his friend's gaze.

"What is it?" Mike asked excitedly, following Will's gaze to the blankets and pillows, the super-com beside them. "Did you see -"

"Come on, Mike," Lucas said pessimistically but in as gentle a tone as he could. "She's gone. We all saw her d-"

Dustin slapped Lucas on the arm, shooting him a look.

Mike just glared at Lucas, still desperate to hold onto his hope.

"No," Will began, Mike's heart sinking momentarily. "I-I think I did?"

"Really?" Mike's voice rose in pitch, his face immediately brightening. "Did she say anything? Is she okay? How did she get there?"

"I don't know," Will shook his head as his friends listened earnestly. "I thought I saw someone in here," He gestured to the fort. "But when I came over, that's when I came back,"

"This is mental," Dustin said, shaking his head.

"Are you sure it was a person?" Lucas questioned. "What if there's another monster in there? Like the demogorgon?"

"I didn't see them very well," Will said. "But I think it was her,"

"Are you sure?" Mike asked, his enthusiasm leaping ahead.

"Dude," Dustin said. "He just said he wasn't sure,"

"Can you... are you able to go back?" Mike wondered. "You said this happened before?"

"Yeah," Will nodded. "But it happens randomly. I don't know why or how to control it. I can just feel when it's about to happen,"

Mike sighed, sitting back on his haunches.

"Like I said," Dustin nodded knowingly. "Mental,"

Mike was caught up in thought at this point. If Will had in fact seen Eleven in the Upside Down then that would mean she hadn't also died when she killed the monster. Maybe that meant they could find her and bring her back? But how? And even still, was she okay? Will had been in the Upside Down for only a week and barely made it out alive. It had been a *month* since Eleven disappeared...

"We've gotta find a way to get back to the Upside Down," Mike declared.

"Mike, seriously?" Lucas said. "How are we gonna do that?"

"Yeah," Dustin added ruefully. "Remember Chief Hopper said the gate closed when the monster died?"

"And besides," Lucas continued. "We're talking about *Eleven* here. If it was really her, why wouldn't she use *this* to talk to us *right now*?"

"Maybe her energy's zapped!" Mike rationalized. "I dunno!"

"Mike, you're losin' it, man," Lucas sighed, earning another smack and pointed look from Dustin.

"What are you talking about?" Mike raised an eyebrow.

"She's gone, man," Lucas gestured wildly, his arms wide as he looked around the room. "It sucks. It *really* sucks but it's the truth, Mike. And you haven't accepted it," He continued, despite Mike's glare. "I mean, you've got this fort set up like a shrine -"

"*Abort, Lucas. Abort!*" Dustin muttered.

"-and why are we not freaking out about the fact that Will is *randomly* slipping in and out of that place? Like, *hello*? He just appeared out of nowhere!"

"But you're okay," Mike turned to his friend who, despite his circumstances, was sitting rather comfortably at this point. "Right, Will?"

"Yeah, I think so," Will nodded.

"So what now?" Dustin asked, earning an incredulous look from Lucas.

Mike's brow set with determination. "We've gotta find a way to find Eleven,"

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"If you're lost, you can look and you will find me, time after time..."

2. Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)

Chapter 2: Sweet Dreams Are Make Of This (by Eurythmics)

"Sweet dreams are made of this. Who am I to disagree? I travel the world and the seven seas, everybody's lookin' for something..."

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Later that night, Will was hesitant to go to sleep. What if he ended up in the Upside Down again and stayed even longer than last time? What if he couldn't get back? Before tonight, he'd never stayed for more than two seconds since his return home last month. What was happening?

He could still hear Jonathan in his room, walking around. His mom was in the living room watching TV and smoking a cigarette, still wearing her jacket from the General Store after a particularly long shift. While he didn't want to be alone, he knew that there were two possibilities if he left his room post-bedtime - either he would be immediately sent back to bed or he would have to explain why he was having trouble sleeping and this whole crazy secret of his would be blown wide open. Not being quite ready for that yet, coupled with his terrible lying skills, meant that Will would have to just find a way to relax and fall asleep.

As the time passed and Will's eyelids grew weary, he drifted off into a restless sleep.

He was in the Upside Down again. He could tell by the layout that he was in the Wheeler's basement. Everything around him was dark and the cold air pricked at the skin of his exposed face and sent chills through the rest of his body. White specks of matter floated aimlessly through the air - he'd never quite figured out what those were. Adrenaline coursed through him as he stepped forward. He'd never actually seen the monster get killed so there was still a small part of him that worried it would appear out of nowhere.

Will watched his steps closely, avoiding large vines that wrapped themselves around the basement stairs and across the floor. Behind him

was the half bathroom and brown sludged dripped down the walls and over the toilet. The sink was wrapped in vines and in the darkness he could just barely make out the shapes of everything around him.

The air was still and quiet, such a stark contrast from the lively atmosphere that was Mike's house in the real world. The real version of this house was warm and inviting with people around all the time. The emptiness of the space before him, in contrast to what he knew it should be, was more than disconcerting.

Just a few feet away he could see the blanket fort. He'd never known Eleven, nor had he ever seen a picture, but his friends' descriptions of her and everything they'd done together were enough for him to piece her together in his mind.

Cautiously stepping forward, Will could make out what appeared to be the back of someone's head lying on the pillows in the blanket fort. Their head was shaved which immediately triggered him into thinking this must be Eleven. What were the chances?

Whoever it was never noticed him. They never turned around at least. Will could make out the form of their shoulder, a body resting on its side and curled into a fetal position. The outer blanket of the fort served as a curtain, preventing him from seeing the state of the person in front of him. Were they alive?

Mike's super-com sat nestled against the pillow beside this person's resting head, further supported by a thick vine that encircled the entirety of the fort. Brown sludge glistened as it slowly slid down the back of the super-com.

Curious but still cautious, Will trudged through the muck, getting closer and closer to the blanket fort. Who was this person and why were they here? If it was Eleven, he hoped for Mike's sake that she was alright. Now standing just outside the fort, shielded by the thin veil of one of the sheets, Will crouched down. He stared intently at the back of this person's shaved head, ready to bolt at the first sign of a threatening movement. So far though, nothing. Not an adjustment in position or the faint rising and falling of shoulders with each breath. He reached forward, his hand trembling as he began to pull back the curtain so he could get a better look at this figure before him.

Suddenly, the figure was gone. The room was warm and he could smell the faint scent of pizza. The lights were bright and he winced at the adjustment. He wasn't in the Upside Down anymore and his friends surrounded him with questions he didn't know how to answer.

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After El had disappeared with the monster, Mike had had a difficult time adjusting. He cried more often than he liked to admit but did his best to hide that from his friends. She was gone. His head spun with the thought of how much had changed over the course of a week. One day he's playing D&D with friends and seven days later, he's had more terrifying, intense, and kind of awesome experiences than he ever could have imagined. He'd never felt the way he felt with El before and while that had been scary, it also felt kind of good. She was special and he liked her. He really liked her.

Sometimes he had nightmares about that night at the school. He could still see the monster, the petals of its head opening and a piercing screech rattling his ears. Claws outstretched as it came closer and closer. He wanted to take it down. He had to protect El. But they were losing and the monster was still coming.

He could still feel the loss of control of his own body as El pushed him back. He could feel his back slam into the counter behind him but he didn't even care about that. He was stuck in that spot - El wouldn't let him move. And as he watched her approach the monster, now pinned against the wall with her mind, the ache in his heart was overwhelming. He knew what she was doing but he begged and wished to be wrong. Thinking about it was enough to make him tear up and the sight of her face turning back to him, her eyes bloodshot and her sad but painfully brave expression haunted him. She'd whispered her goodbye to him and in remembering this moment, Mike wondered if he'd ever forget the sound of her voice. He didn't even have a picture of her. She existed only in his memory.

A shred of him couldn't give up hope, though. That's why he'd put the blanket fort back together in the early morning hours following that night in the school. The bad men from the lab had torn the basement apart looking for traces of El and clues that would guide them to her location. Coming home after saying good-bye to her had been hard

enough but to see the blanket fort torn down, pillows and sheet strewn about haphazardly, was too much.

"Why did you do that, El?" He had yelled angrily, his voice breaking. He'd thrown one of the pillows across the room before gathering another in his arms and sobbing into it for several minutes. "It's *not fair!*" He whispered, repeating it to himself over and over again. He couldn't get those images out of his head. He couldn't escape what haunted him.

As he settled, his brow fixed with determination. He rummaged through the torn-apart basement until he found his super-com.

"El, this is Mike!" He said, forcing an even tone from his voice but unable to keep his pitch from rising and falling. "Do you copy? Over,"

Nothing but static.

"El! Are you there? Can you hear this? OVER!"

Still nothing. Pursing his lips and taking a shaky breath, he gathered up the pillows and returned them to what had once been El's makeshift fort. He left the super-com resting against the pillows, draped sheets and returned blankets to their original placement, arranging everything just as it had once been before El left. He'd sat in the fort late into the night, waiting on a call that never came.

He couldn't give up, though, and that's why the fort had stayed set up like that for this past month.

Now lying awake in his bed, with the light from the moon outside casting shadows over everything in his room, he had trouble settling his mind down enough to fall asleep. He remembered showing El his trophies and his toys and how he'd had her hide in the closet so his mom wouldn't find her. Everything reminded him of her and it was hard to get his brain to shut off.

He finally fell asleep, his eyelids slowly drooping closed with his final gaze resting on the super-com on the nightstand by his bed. Just in case.

He didn't recognize the place he was in, not completely at least. Everything

was dark and slimey. Vines of varying sizes wrapped themselves around everything they touched - doors, banisters, countertops. It looked like his house but it wasn't the same. As he crossed the kitchen and approached the basement stairs, he looked down into the dark cellar with intrigued trepidation. The minimal light that illuminated his path bounced off of white specks in the air. They almost looked like snowflakes frozen in space but that was the least of his concerns.

He didn't know where he was but he felt an inexplicable pull to go down into the basement. Blindly taking each step one at a time, he winced in disgust at the feeling of stepping on sludge. He could feel his feet crush something that felt and looked like a thick, long slug but he couldn't be sure.

His eyes immediately trained themselves on the blanket fort on the side of the basement, as they usually did when he was awake. His chest felt like a sinkhole had opened up within him as he caught sight of El's familiar figure. Her shaved head, the pink dress, the blue jacket that had once been his but had been selected for donation just a week before El appeared. It was her, it had to be her!

"El?!" Mike exclaimed excitedly, desperately, as he finished his descent of the steps, narrowly avoiding slipping on a slimey brown puddle at the base of the staircase.

"Mike," A small voice from the blanket fort sent his heart to fluttering as he closed the distance between himself and the fort.

El shifted from her spot and weakly looked up at Mike who was now crouched before her, soaking in her presence.

"El? El!" Mike couldn't stop saying her name. There she was, every detail of her face being sketched into his memory once again. Despite being smudged with dirt and covered in splotches of slime, she was still pretty and he couldn't stop staring. He gingerly moved a little closer, his hand coming up to touch her shoulder. He could feel her sigh at the contact. "El, I'm so glad I found you. How do I get you home? Are you okay? What do I do?"

The small girl didn't respond but she met his gaze.

"Is this the Upside Down?" He asked, his tone serious as he tried to formulate a plan.

Eleven gave a small nod, her eyes half-lidded.

"Do you still have your powers? How do we get you back?"

"Tired," She said simply, closing her eyes slowly, agonizingly, and causing Mike to hold his breath until she opened them again.

"So we need to get your strength back up," Mike reasoned, remembering how drained she'd be even before she went head to head with the monster. "Okay, we can do that. Um..." He looked around, not entirely sure as to how that would actually happen. He tried not to become disheartened, at least not in front of her.

"Mike," Eleven's voice was small but just as he'd remembered it. She moved her hand closer to Mike's hand that was currently resting on the blanket, supporting his weight. He watched as she placed it over his and he could feel his heart swell at the contact.

"We'll get you out of here," Mike said adamantly as he leaned down, embracing Eleven in a half-hug while holding her hand in his free one. "I promise,"

A clap of thunder from an overnight storm rolling into town startled Mike awake. As he looked around, regaining his bearings and realizing he was still in his room and tucked under the covers, his heart felt heavy once again. He'd been dreaming, but it felt so real. Her voice, her face - everything about it was like it had actually happened.

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"Hold your head up, keep your head up, movin' on..."

3. Always Something There To Remind Me

[A/N: Thank you for the reviews/favorites/follows! This chapter is longer than the others so far so I hope you enjoy! Your feedback is welcome and appreciated! :)]

Chapter 3: Always Something There To Remind Me (by Naked Eyes)

"I walk along the city streets you used to walk along with me, and every step I take reminds me of just how we used to be..."

.....

An owl hooted in the distance, its call echoing over the lake in front of him as Hopper lounged against the wooden rail of his deck. An almost-full moon hung high in the sky, illuminating the surface of the lake and bouncing light off the rippling patterns in the water. The air was cold, the water even colder, but the lake wouldn't freeze for another few weeks if the years prior were any indication.

Clad in sweatpants and an open button-down flannel, Hopper took a long drag on his cigarette as he lost himself in his thoughts, his gaze fixed on the ripples in the lake where a fish was tickling the surface of the water.

He'd never gotten the best sleep since Sarah died. His dreams were always peppered with bittersweet memories that left him wishing to return to sleep whenever morning came. After bringing the Byers boy back from the Upside Down and, in doing so, sacrificing the telekinetic girl who'd helped them in their mission, his insomnia had only worsened. He hadn't seen it happen but he'd seen and heard the aftermath of what her disappearance had done to the boys. Especially that Wheeler kid. In strange ways he couldn't place, she'd reminded him of his daughter and he wasn't quite sure how to feel about that either.

Hopper watched as the smoke billowing out of his nose and mouth wafted through the night air, eventually disappearing in the moon's reflection.

As far as anyone knew, he'd moved on since the strange events surrounding Will Byers' disappearance and homecoming. That was the idea behind his new position, after all. Secrecy and covert operations were familiar to him as he'd spent the better part of the last several years living in a world without windows and doors leading to his inner world kept firmly locked. Even the people who knew about what had happened to his daughter were still kept at arm's length.

He was working on contract with the government, his experience in the Upside Down having been seen as an asset to the Department of Energy. With Dr. Brenner unaccounted for and much of the former staff of the agency having been killed by the monster last month, Hopper had grudgingly agreed. He did, in fact, owe them the girl in exchange for he and Joyce's release and venture into the Upside Down to find Will. But what the agents at the lab didn't realize was that he wasn't skilled just at keeping their secrets. He harbored a few of his own, keeping what he knew close like a good hand in poker.

He remembered the night they brought Will out of the Upside Down and took him to the hospital. Vivid memories hung in his mind like cobwebs in an attic, trapping him with every step and distracting his view from everything else around him. Joyce's frantic, hopeful crying as she clutched her boy who'd finally started breathing again, the eyes of the older Byers boy and the Wheeler girl that would always be filled with images more traumatizing than any person should ever have to witness, the quiet whimpering cries of a trio of middle school boys, a missing girl.

Eggos.

Mike Wheeler had mentioned to his sister that their friend - he'd called her Eleven - had loved Eggos. The same girl he'd just exchanged in a deal with the Devil, he could now imagine sitting at someone's breakfast table, dressing a stack of Eggo waffles with more syrup than he could stand to look at. The thought turned his stomach with the nausea of guilt.

The first time he'd seen the videos had been what really haunted him. They were always shot from above, likely a corner in the ceiling of each room. He'd known that the lab had security cameras everywhere

and monitored everything that happened in their facility but he hadn't been prepared to see Eleven's past in all its grainy, heartbreaking detail.

It had been a late night at the lab. Most of the agents had already left for the evening, leaving a slimmer night crew on staff. Hopper had paid great attention to the subtle details around him during his escorted tours with the higher-ups and with his own access card, he was able to move freely through the majority of the facility. He wondered how the agents could trust him with that level of security clearance but then he remembered that these agents didn't always behave ethically or play by the rules.

But that was okay because neither did he.

He hadn't been looking for anything in particular but the suppressed big city detective still lurking inside of him had a hunch, an inclination, a drive... he couldn't put a pin on it but he followed it. It had scarcely led him astray in the past. He'd found himself in the security tape room where about a dozen small screens showed grainy footage of several key areas around the facility. Everything was quiet from what he could see. There wasn't much hustle and bustle at 8 o'clock at night unless something serious was going on. For all intents and purposes, it looked like another quiet night.

Curiosity led him and he followed the scent like a bloodhound, scouting out the room. There were a few shelves with vaguely marked tapes lined up neatly and organized by number, then alphabetically. The walls of the room had several filing cabinets with key locks. After perusing the tapes on the shelves, he'd tried to open one of the cabinets, only to have it balk against him. He fingered through the tapes on the shelves once again, a single tape catching his eye. It was sticking out the slightest bit, as if someone had pulled it from the shelf recently and had failed to put it back with the same level of precision the other tapes had received.

011-67

He eyed the label on the side of the VHS case suspiciously, picking up the tape and looking for any other clues that could indicate more about the contents of this tape. He checked the TV screens to see if

anyone was coming. One researcher was sitting at a desk, writing in a notepad somewhere on the other side of the building. A couple of other scientists were engaged in discussion in the lobby with one of the new agents the facility had hired. Hopper stepped to the door and peered into the hallway. Quiet. Looking around the room for a camera, he found nothing. It would be ironic to have a camera in this room, wouldn't it? And even still, would the footage show up in this room or in another room he wasn't aware of? Showing little prudence, Hopper plucked the VHS tape from its case and stuck it into the player. He watched one darkened screen come to life and he immediately knew his hunch had been right.

From the camera's angle, he could see a small child with a shaved head sitting at a table in an otherwise barren room. She had a device on her head with wires sticking out in every direction, attaching electrodes to her forehead, temples, and the back of her head. There was a window in front of the girl where he could vaguely make out the shapes of adults but none were recognizable and the faces were obscured. A voice came over the intercom in the video.

"You're doing very well, Eleven," The voice said and he suspected it to be Dr. Brenner. "We're going to try something new today. Is that okay?"

The girl barely moved, her head tilted down and her profile flickering with the grainy film quality. Two agents dressed in white then entered the room, carrying a cage with a fluffy white cat. It meowed loudly as they stationed it in front of Eleven and the girl darted her gaze from the cat to the window. Even despite the camera distance and poor film quality, Hopper could see the way her facial expression turned to one of anguish and despair, though she never said a word.

The cat rubbed itself against the bars of its prison, meowing loudly at Eleven as she looked at it in horror, her face trembling.

"Eleven," Dr. Brenner's voice said of the intercom. "Remember what we talked about this morning. Now, with your powers, I want you to kill this cat,"

The way he spoke the words so coldly, as if it were a completely normal thing to request of a little girl sent a chill down Hopper's

spine. He watched as Eleven stared at the cat, her eyes brimming with tears as the once friendly, plaintive cat began to take a defensive stance. He watched as it hissed at her intense gaze and he felt a force inside of him begging to turn the video off. But he was a cop, first and foremost, and he'd developed the ability long ago to resist that force. He faced the horrific head-on and while it made him a good cop, it also hardened him quite a bit over the years.

Movement on one of the other screens had caught his eye and he saw that one of the agents, a superior of his, was heading down this particular hallway. He quickly ejected the tape and stuffed it back into its case, hiding it in one of the pockets inside his winter coat. When his superior had passed by the room, Hopper hiding against the wall and concealed by shadows, he'd decided to call it a night and head out. The next time he came to the lab, he'd picked the locks of the filing cabinets, those detective instincts at work once again. That was how he'd ended up with videos 1-77 of Eleven. It'd taken him a couple of weeks to get through each one and they'd varied in length, some lasting as long as 10 hours per tape. In the end, he'd never be able to erase the knowledge of what that little girl had been through. Guilt gnawed at him, reminding him that her fate had been his fault. He'd been quite despondent over it until he'd overheard some of the researchers discussing plans to find "the girl". Talk of hazmat suits and questionable lifeforms clued him in that they were talking about the Upside Down. At that point, he'd yet to be sent into the dark and dismal dimension but he knew that was ultimately their plan for him. After all, he and Joyce had been the only ones thus far to venture into that world and return unscathed.

So Eleven was alive somewhere in the Upside Down and the researchers wanted to find her. For what purpose, he couldn't be sure but based on the content of the videos he'd found, it wouldn't be good.

He couldn't let that happen. He couldn't just sit idle, leaving that girl to such a fate. He'd made a choice once before that, despite the overwhelmingly positive nature of the outcome, had still left him with considerable guilt. This could be his chance at redemption. At atonement. He needed to find her first.

Hopper took a final drag on his cigarette and flicked it into the lake,

exhaling slowly. His decision to find Eleven had been weeks ago. He'd already explored the Upside Down twice at this point with little trace of her to be found. Maybe the researchers had been wrong and maybe he actually had died that day at the school. Still, he couldn't give up yet.

After stuffing his feet into his boots and slipping into a big winter coat, Hopper headed out on a familiar route. His breath came in clouds in his truck until the heat finally kicked in but by that time, he was already almost to his destination. He pulled over along the side of the road, his front bumper scraping against a mound of old snow that had been shoved to the edges of the street by a snowplow. Most of the snow from last week had melted at this point, leaving only icy mounds leftover from shoveling and plowing, but the weather forecast was calling for more in a couple days.

Hopper trudged across the icy snow barrier and into the woods, following a familiar path that had once been clearly marked by his tracks in the snow.

He knelt beside a dropbox, pulling out a pair of Eggos wrapped in cellophane that he'd prepared earlier that evening. Opening the lid to the box, he found the food he'd left there the day before was gone. He liked to think that it was because Eleven had found the food in the Upside Down and taken it but there was no way to be sure. For all he knew, he could be feeding the animals in the woods or a homeless person - but he returned every day to find an empty dropbox again and again and in his mind, it was Eleven. That was the only way he got any sleep at night.

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The boys were planning to meet up at Mike's house the following day to begin their search for Eleven. Mike had talked to Lucas and Will earlier that morning to confirm the time the boys were supposed to show up. Since Dustin didn't live close enough to use the super-com, Mike called his house.

"Hey Dustin," Mike greeted when Dustin picked up the phone. "Can you be here at 10:30?"

"Yeah, sure," Dustin agreed, a tinge of sleepiness still left in his voice though he'd been up for a little while now.

"Okay, good," Mike nodded.

"I'm gonna stop at McDonald's on my way," Dustin said. "I already asked Will and Lucas but do you want anything?"

"I want El back," Mike said stubbornly, remembering his dream and how real it had felt. She had to be out there.

"Yeaaaaah," Dustin quipped. "I've got ten dollars,"

Mike let out an exasperated sigh. "See you soon," He said, hanging up.

By the time his friends had arrived and were mostly finished eating, Mike was more than a little agitated. He paced back and forth in his basement as Will, Lucas, and Dustin finished their breakfast.

"Mike, do you want some of my hash brown?" Will offered.

"No, I'm not hungry," Mike said brusquely, then added, "But thanks,"

"Alright," Lucas said, rolling up the wrapper from his breakfast sandwich. "So what were you saying about some dream you had?"

Mike stopped paced. "It was really weird," He began, then gestured to the blanket fort a few feet away. "She was right there and she was talking to me and everything was really dark and gross,"

"Like the Upside Down," Will breathed thoughtfully.

"I guess?" Mike shrugged. "I dunno, but she said she was tired and I promised her we'd find her,"

"But this was a dream," Lucas said bluntly, one eyebrow raised.

"No - Yes... I think so?" Mike groaned in frustration. "I'm telling you; it wasn't like a regular dream,"

Lucas shook his head in disbelief.

"Come on, you guys!" Mike exclaimed. "What if she's really been out there all this time? She saved us, don't you remember?!"

"Of course we remember!" Dustin chimed in. "But it's kind of a wild goose chase. Will doesn't know how to get to the Upside Down voluntarily and even if he gets there, then what?"

"And the portal's closed," Lucas added. "Chief Hopper told us that like, a week after the fact,"

"Exactly," Dustin agreed. "Dude, we all miss Eleven but we need an actual plan and from what I can see, it looks like we're S.O.L. at this point,"

"But we can't just sit here!" Mike said, his frustration growing.

"Actually," Will's small voice piped up amidst the louder arguing of his friends. "I think we do have something to go on,"

"Really?" Mike turned to his friend, his eyes brightening with hope and his voice rising in pitch.

"Really?" Lucas parroted in a more pessimistic tone.

"Yeah," Will said, leaning one arm against the back of his chair, his friends' eyes focused intently on him. "On my way here this morning, it happened again. I was crossing through the woods near Mirkwood and all of a sudden I was in the Upside Down again,"

"Did you see Eleven?" Mike asked quickly.

"No," Will said and Mike deflated slightly. "But I found this weird box out in the woods. I was in the Upside Down so it was really dark and slimey everywhere but when I opened the box, there was food in it,"

"Food?" Dustin repeated, one eyebrow quirked.

"Yeah," Will nodded. "It was wrapped in plastic wrap but it was still weird that it wasn't like, moldy and gross, you know?"

"What's your point, Will?" Lucas asked impatiently.

"Well, when I switched back out of the Upside Down, it was still there," Will shrugged. "I don't know, I thought it was weird,"

"That makes sense though," Dustin said. "The Upside Down is like this parallel double of our dimension so solid objects like tables and chairs and boxes would be the same across both dimensions,"

"Except life-forms," Lucas added, nodding. "It's weird that someone's leaving food in the woods but I'm not surprised it was in the Upside Down version, too,"

"Wait a minute," Mike finally spoke after having been quiet for several minutes, deep in thought. "Will, what kind of food was it?"

"Oh yeah!" Will suddenly exclaimed, catching the other boys off-guard. "That was the weird part. You said Eleven liked Eggos, right?"

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The sky was grey and overcast as the boys raced to Mirkwood on their bikes.

"You're sure it was Eggos?" Dustin asked, panting slightly as he peddled.

"Pretty sure," Will nodded, focused on the path ahead as Mike led the group to the fateful road. The sun had begun to melt several patches of snow but Mirkwood was one of the last streets to get plowed and as a result, had mounds of icy snow lining the edges, grey with grime from car exhausts. With the constant melting and refreezing of snow, ice patches were scattered around here and there.

"What do we do when we get there?" Lucas asked as the group turned onto Mirkwood.

"We look for El," Mike replied over his shoulder, turning back slightly. "Maybe she's not in the Upside Down at all. What if she got out and is lost somewhere in the woods or something?"

"But what about your dream?" Will asked.

"I... don't know," Mike said. "But we'll figure it out,"

"What if she's like, sending you messages in your mind or something?" Dustin suggested. "That's something she'd do right?"

"*Can* she even do that?" Lucas asked.

"I dunno, maybe?" Mike said, casting another look behind him as his friends following his lead.

He didn't turn around in time to see the crushed patch of ice and snow in front of him or to avoid his front tire going through it and losing traction. As his bike flipped, Will, Lucas, and Dustin quickly dodged the patch and stopped their bikes, watching as Mike was catapulted off his bike.

"Mike!"

"Aughhhh!" Mike yelled before colliding with the pavement and immediately losing consciousness.

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"If you should find you miss the sweet and tender love we used to share, just go back to the places where we used to go and I'll be there..."

4. Never Surrender

Chapter 4: Never Surrender (by Corey Hart)

"Just a little more time is all we're asking for, 'cause just a little more time could open closing doors. Just a little uncertainty can bring you down..."

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Mike's eyes slowly fluttered open as he regained his bearings. The first thing he noticed was the wet, slimy feeling beneath him. He moved his hands and he could feel thick goo sliding between his fingers. As his eyes focused on the brown sludge he found himself in, he startled, breathing heavily as he began to recognize the place. He'd been here once before.

His bike lay in a heap next to him, covered in vines that weaved their way between the handlebars and through the bike chain.

"Mike," A voice next to him and he nearly jumped out of his skin before turning toward the soft sound in his ear.

Eleven was kneeling beside him and he suddenly forgot all about the disgusting gunk on his hands and back and the creepy white particles floating in the air around him.

"Eleven!" He exclaimed, his face visibly lifting at the sight of her. Her clothes were dirty and Nancy's old dress was barely recognizable but aside from some wear and tear, she looked almost as she had the last time he'd seen her. There was some bruising on her face and arms as well as what appeared to be smears of dirt. Her short hair, barely an inch longer than it had been when they'd first met, was slicked down against her head from the cold, moist air. Despite all of this, his heart still fluttered at the sight of her.

"Wh-what's going on?" Mike asked, looking around as he slowly stood up, making vain attempts at straightening up his appearance as brown sludge sluiced off his shoulders. "Am I in the Upside Down?"

Eleven merely shook her head. "I am," She spoke softly.

"Okay..." Mike said, processing. "Where are Lucas and Dustin and Will?"

"Home,"

Mike took a moment to think before speaking again. "I fell off my bike," He began, reciting what he remembered. "We were on our way to Mirkwood and I fell off my bike... and I hit my head," He paused. "Am I... Am I dead?"

Eleven's eyes widened and she quickly shook her head quite emphatically.

Mike furrowed his brow. "Okay... Am I unconscious?"

Eleven nodded.

"So you're... talking to me because I'm unconscious?" He gathered.

Eleven made a face, indicating he was partially right. "Too weak," She said, pointing to herself.

Mike frowned. "So your powers..." He reasoned. "You can't do as much, can you? Like open a portal?"

Eleven shook her head sadly, her doe eyes looking up at him wistfully.

"Crap," He muttered, biting his lip as he thought.

Some indistinct chatter from farther out in the woods caught El's attention and her body stiffened at the sound. Mike could see a familiar fear in her eyes.

"What is it?" Mike asked, immediately stepping in front of her and peering into the dim, foggy woods. "Is it the monster? Is it back?"

El shook her head vigorously, her lip trembling. "Bad men,"

"What?" Mike said incredulously. "No, El, they're dead, remember?"

She quirked an eyebrow at him, confused, but more chatter from the woods distracted her and she was becoming more visibly agitated.

"N-not safe," She murmured repeatedly, slowly beginning to back away from where they stood. "Not safe..."

"Wait, El, don't go," Mike said, grabbing her hand instinctively.

"How...How did they even get here?"

"The lab," She said softly, her voice barely a whisper as her eyes never left the woods.

Mike could hear radios in the distance. Try as he did to see into the forest, it was to no avail. He could barely see several feet in front of him.

"El, how do you know -" He began, but when he turned around, she was gone.

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Video 011-12

A young child sat nervously on a cold metal chair, her hospital gown doing little to protect her from its harsh chill. Thin legs dangled from the chair and she looked around nervously, wondering what was going to happen. Long brown hair swished back and forth every time she darted her gaze around the room. She couldn't have been more than four years old, the chair all but swallowing her up with its size. There was an empty table in front of her, also cold and metal, and a machine twice her size stationed next to her. She looked at it apprehensively, then refused to look at it again. As she fidgeted with her hospital gown, the mirror on the wall opposite her revealed itself to be a window with several figures standing behind the glass.

A tall man with white hair entered the room and the girl looked up at him, shrinking in her chair the slightest bit.

"Hello, Eleven," He greeted her warmly but his fatherly tone did nothing to assuage her visible tension. "Today's your big day. Aren't you excited?"

She stared blankly at the man who was undeterred by her lack of response. He took a seat next to the small girl and motioned to the two-way mirror for someone to enter. Two other men dressed in white entered the room, one carrying a small box.

"Do you know what this is?" The tall, white-haired man gestured to the monstrous machine next to her. The little girl shook her head. "This is an electroencephalograph," He said simply, as if a girl her age could understand such a large word. "We use this to measure what people can

do with their brains," He tapped the girl on the forehead and she winced at the contact but otherwise did not move. "I think we can learn a lot from you, Eleven," He said, standing up. "You'll help us, won't you?"

Eyes wide, she turned her gaze from the white-haired man, to each of the men standing in wait against the wall, then back to the first man.

Despite her timidity, she was somehow able to speak. She nodded, "Yes, Papa,"

"Very good," He said, patting her head and running a hand through her hair. He looked to the guards and nodded in the girl's direction. The guard holding the box stepped forward, pulling a pair of clippers out of the box and plugging them into the outlet across the table. The other guard approached, ready to assist. The girl warily followed the guards' movements, scooting closer to the white-haired man. "Now Eleven," The white-haired man continued, unfazed by her obvious apprehension. "In order for you to help us, we'll be using this machine," He reached underneath the EEG, retrieving a device shaped like a helmet but made of metal and wire electrodes. The girl turned to him and balked at the device in his hands, her eyes wide and frightened.

One of the guards took hold of her shoulders, causing her to jump, as the other guard switched on the clippers. A loud buzzing sound filled the room and overpowered much of the audio. The little girl began to cry as she squirmed against the chair.

"No, Papa!" She cried, swatting at the guard with the clippers. "No!"

"Eleven," The white-haired man said more sternly and the young girl immediately stopped moving as though paralyzed. "Be still,"

Her shoulders shook with her crying as the guard touched the clippers to her scalp. A long chunk of hair fell to the floor and the girl began to sob louder.

"Nooooo!" She whimpered as the clippers came at her again and again. "No!" Her fear of the clippers and what was happening outweighing the white-haired man's intimidation. She began to thrash about violently in the chair, almost toppling it over. Another guard rushed in and grabbed hold of one of her arms as the guard previously holding her down secured her

other arm. Pinning her against the metal chair, her movements were restricted though she tried to break free, crying all the while. The guard with the clippers continued to shave her hair in large patches and a pile of dark brown hair encircled the chair. The girl was quiet for a moment and then in a sudden burst of energy, began to thrash about once again, knocking the two guards holding her off balance.

"Take her to the room," The white-haired man said evenly and the girl suddenly turned to him, her eyes flooded with tears.

"No, Papa!" She cried as the guards lifted her out of her chair, her legs thrashing about and kicking them in the sides. She was so small, one guard wrapped a hand around both of her ankles as they maneuvered her such that one was carrying her legs and the other guard held her arms together.

"Papa!" She screamed as they carried her out of the room, her head half-shaved and the hair that remained disheveled as the white-haired man watched.

The video promptly cut to the young girl sitting in the metal chair again, her head fully shaved at this point. Her shoulders trembled but she was otherwise silent. The white-haired man stood behind her and only one guard remained at the side of the room. A book sat on the table in front of her and the girl was staring at it, her face void of emotion. The white-haired man lifted the wired device onto her head and the guard walked over to assist with applying the electrodes to her scalp.

"Now Eleven," The white-haired man said once the electrodes were in place. "Your first task is simple. I want you to open this book,"

The girl started to reach for the book but the white-haired man stopped her hand with his. "No, no," He said, putting her hand back in her lap.

"Not with your hands," He shook his head then tapped her on the forehead. "With your mind,"

She stared at him, never saying a word.

"I know you can do it," He said encouragingly. "Do you think you can try this for me? For your Papa?"

She inhaled deeply, her gaze fixed on him, before slowly nodding and turning back to the book. She stared at it for several seconds, her brow furrowed deeply as she concentrated. The white-haired man and the guard stood back, watching. Behind the two-way mirror, a few other indistinct figures watched as well. After a few moments, she sat back in the chair.

"Don't stop, Eleven," The white-haired man commanded. "You need to do this. Open the book,"

She turned her gaze back to the book, leaning forward as she put everything she had into focusing on that book. Again, nothing.

"Eleven," The white-haired man scolded as he reviewed the readings coming from the EEG. "You're not trying hard enough. Open the book!"

Her shoulders began to shake once again as she started to whimper but as the guard began to approach, she quickly quieted and threw her focus back into the book. Finally, the cover of the book began to tremble, eventually flipping open on the table.

"Incredible," The white-haired man breathed.

A drop of blood slid down from the young girl's nose and she reached up to catch the trickle. Looking at her hand, her face visibly faltered and tears welled in her eyes as she began to cry hysterically.

The white-haired man crouched down to the girl, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping the small drop of blood from her face. She jumped slightly at the contact.

"See?" He said, the girl watching his actions intently. "I knew you could do it. We'll practice more later,"

"Take her back to her room," The white-haired man ordered the guard. "That's enough for this afternoon,"

The guard who had shaved her head picked her up from the chair, carrying her like a sack of potatoes out of the room.

"Papa!" She cried, reaching out for the white-haired man before being whisked out of the room as the man she called 'Papa' stayed behind.

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"Mike!"

"Mike?"

"Mike!"

"Dude, wake up!"

"Should we call 9-1-1?"

"No, look! He's waking up!"

As he opened his eyes, Mike could feel a raging headache emanating from a growing bump on the back of his head. Everything seemed so bright as he sat up, clutching his head and wincing.

"Mike, are you okay?" Will asked. All three of his friends were crouched down around him, their bikes surrounding them as they hovered on the side of the street.

Dustin waved a hand in front of Mike's face. "Say something, man,"

"I-I saw El," Mike breathed as he regained his senses. He was back in Mirkwood. The real Mirkwood. The sun was out, the trees in the woods next to them dripped with melting snow, and they were surrounded by mounds of icy, dirty snow. Mike felt his back. It was wet with melted snow and ice but there was no brown sludge to be found. "She was right here,"

"Yeah, she was," Will said softly.

"Huh?" Mike did a double-take. "You saw her, too?"

"You were out for a few minutes, Mike," Dustin said, concern still lingering in his tone.

"Will disappeared again," Lucas explained. "While you were knocked out,"

"You did?" Mike turned to Will. "What happened?"

"As soon as you wiped out, I went back into the Upside Down again," Will began.

"Yeah," Dustin said, adding. "He disappeared right off his bike and it crashed over there!" He pointed to the other side of the street where Will's bike lay.

"I didn't come back right away so I started walking into the woods," Will continued. "She was over at that dropbox. I saw her pull the food out of it and she saw me, too,"

"Did she say anything to you?" Mike asked.

Will shook his head. "She looked scared though. We heard something deeper in the woods and before I could say anything to her, she ran away,"

Mike furrowed his brow, pulling his knees to his chest and crossing his arms over them as he listened. "I talked to her again... I think,"

"You *think*?" Lucas inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah," Mike said. "I mean, it sounds crazy but I'm pretty sure you were right, Dustin,"

"Really?" Dustin brightened.

"*Really*?" Lucas repeated, a little less convinced.

"Yeah," Mike nodded. "She's really tired and her powers are weakened,"

"I can't believe she's still okay since she's been in the Upside Down so long," Will thought aloud.

"Maybe she's immune to it," Dustin guessed and Lucas swatted him on the arm.

"What sense does *that* make?"

"*Uh, a lot*?" Dustin snarked. "What other explanation would you have for her to still be alive in there?"

"Guys," Mike interrupted. "We can figure that out later. The point is that she's still alive and she's in trouble,"

"Trouble, how?" Lucas asked.

"Is there another monster?" Dustin wondered, nudging Will who shook his head.

"I only saw one when I was there,"

"She said there's bad men after her again," Mike clarified.

"But they all died at the school," Dustin replied.

"Well, maybe they didn't," Mike shrugged. "Or maybe there's more. I dunno, but we've gotta get her out of there,"

"But how are we supposed to do that?" Lucas interjected. "Maybe you guys forgot but *there's no portal*, remember?"

"Yes there is," Mike countered. "El said the portal in the lab is still open,"

Dustin raised an eyebrow. "But the Chief said-"

"Forget the Chief!" Mike interrupted.

"Forget the - *Mike*, have you forgotten who *saved* our asses?" Lucas confronted. "*And* saved Will?"

Mike shook his head, backtracking. "Just - ugh, what if the Chief is wrong?"

"Then why would he tell us the portal closed, hmm?" Lucas countered.

Dustin's eyes widened. "Lando,"

"Dude, *shut up* about Lando!" Lucas smacked Dustin on the arm, sighing in exasperation. "The Chief is on our side!"

"Is there something we can do to find out if the portal actually is open?" Will finally spoke up.

The other boys quieted and after a brief pause, Mike exclaimed, "The compasses!"

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"So if you're lost and on your own, you can never surrender..."

[A/N: Hello all! Thank you all so much for the reads/reviews/follows/favorites! I got really excited tonight because I connected some ideas in my head and I'm thinking this fic is actually going to be longer than I originally intended! Please let me know if there's anything you didn't understand or I could explain better in the story. Also, being in character is super important to be so if you could let me know how I'm doing with that, I'd really appreciate it! Other than that, thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy the rest of this journey! XD]

5. Shake It Out

[A/N: Hey all! I was wondering how you guys are feeling about the songs for each chapter. Do you like them? Hate them? Don't care? Because I was thinking about possibly removing the whole chapter songs thing and going in a slightly different direction as far as songs in the story are concerned. But if you dig them/don't care, then I dunno!

ALSO, I MADE A FANVIDEO. AHHHHH. Never done that before but there's this song from The Phantom of the Opera that Josh Groban and Kelly Clarkson do called "All I Ask Of You" and ahhhh I felt like it was so perfect for Mike and Eleven. Check it out on Youtube if you like! I've been fangirling over them and this song for days . and hence, a fanvideo was born XD

Eitherwho, that's enough of my chattering! I hope you like this chapter and as always, if you enjoy it, please review/favorite/follow! :)]

Chapter 5: Shake It Out (by Florence + The Machine)

"Regrets collect like old friends, here to relive your darkest moments. I can see no way, I can see no way, and all of the ghouls come out to play..."

.....

"Compasses?" Will parroted, looking around to his friends for an explanation.

"Yeah," Lucas nodded as Dustin slipped out of his backpack and began to rummage through it. "If the portal is still open, it would disrupt the electromagnetic fields,"

"Oh, okay!" Will brightened. "So instead of pointing to true North, the needle would point toward the portal?"

"Exactly," Dustin said, tossing aside a box of candy he'd dug out of his backpack as he scoured the bag's contents.

"Guys," Mike said, peering past his friends and up the road.

"Are you sure it's in there?" Lucas asked impatiently, apparently not hearing Mike.

"I swear I left it in here," Dustin mumbled to himself, his hand feeling around the bottom of the backpack.

"Guys!" Mike said louder, more demanding.

"Eureka!" Dustin exclaimed, finally retrieving the compass and holding it up victoriously.

"What, Mike?" Lucas asked but as he followed his friend's gaze, he didn't need an answer.

A vehicle was making its way down the road toward them, slowing down as it got closer. All four boys froze. Ever since they were chased down by government agents, they always felt a twinge of fear run through them at unfamiliar approaching cars. The fact that they were only a few yards away from the fence that bordered Hawkins Lab did nothing to assuage their anxiety.

"Act casual!" Dustin whispered hoarsely as he stuffed his hands in his pockets, the compass tucked safely in his fist, and started to stroll away from the road lackadaisically.

"*That's* casual?!" Lucas exclaimed, his hands gesturing wildly to Dustin's awkwardly bouncing gait. "You look like an idiot!"

"Shut up, Lucas!" Dustin shot back through gritted teeth.

Mike groaned, turning away from the car and trying to quickly come up with a plan if they needed to run. He tried to remind himself that there was probably nothing to worry about. Nothing out of the ordinary had happened in a month. Still, he couldn't help the slight adrenaline rush and it didn't hurt to be prepared to bolt if some government agents decided to finish what they started.

As the car slowed to a stop next to the boys' bikes, Dustin looked up at the barren tree limbs above them.

"*Shit, shit, shit...*" He muttered to himself.

"What do we do?" Lucas asked as the boys shuffled further away from the road.

"Guys, it's just Hopper," Will said, relieving the tension as his friends turned around to see the familiar SUV of the Hawkins Police Chief.

"What are you kids doin' out here?" Hopper asked as he stepped out of the car, one arm leaning against the roof of his vehicle.

"Nothing," Mike replied quickly.

"Taking a walk!" Lucas blurted out.

"*Love* that cardio," Dustin added, nodding affirmatively as he moved his arms back and forth as though he were power-walking.

Hopper raised an eyebrow at the boys. "Right," He said, unconvinced but seemingly moving away from the subject. "Well, the weather is calling for a hell of a storm so I suggest you all get home before it rolls in,"

"We'll definitely get on that," Mike nodded, still not entirely comfortable with the Police Chief stumbling upon them only a few yards away from Hawkins Lab property. Maybe it was all in his mind but he felt like he was wearing a sign that said 'Currently searching for portal to find missing telekinetic girl potentially lost in alternate dimension'.

"Thanks for the heads up!" Will offered respectfully.

Hopper eyed them a moment longer before slipping back into his vehicle and continuing to drive down the icy road.

Dustin waited until Hopper's SUV was out of sight to speak. "Okay, that is such bull,"

"What?" Mike asked.

"The *storm*?" Dustin said. "My mom was watching the news when I left this morning. It isn't supposed to snow until late *tonight*,"

"So?" Lucas replied sarcastically. "What's your point?"

Dustin groaned, rolling his eyes. "Do I have to spell it out? Was that seriously *not* suspicious to you?"

"Um, *no*?" Lucas countered.

Before Dustin could respond, Will retched, drawing all three boys' attention to their friend who was currently lurching forward.

"Will, are you okay?" Mike asked, stepping forward but immediately jumping back as a long, slimey slug-like creature was projected from Will's mouth and landed on the cold ground in front of them.

"What the hell is *that*?!" Lucas exclaimed as the slug slithered away and disappeared into the forest brush.

"Dude, that's so gross," Dustin shook his head, staring in the direction the slug had gone.

Will coughed, wiping his mouth, and Mike walked over, patting his friend on the back. "You alright, Will?" Mike's tone was concerned. None of them had ever seen Will vomit a slug, though they were aware it had been happening. The reality of it was more unnerving than expected.

Will nodded weakly. "Yeah," His voice was raspy and he coughed again.

"Maybe we should take him home," Dustin suggested.

"I'm fine, guys," Will shook his head before retching again but this time he forced the nausea away as his friends watched warily. "Really,"

"You don't seem fine," Lucas said pointedly, gesturing to his friend who still looked a bit green in the face.

"C'mon," Mike said, guiding his friend back to the road where their bikes lay. "We can come back later. It's totally cool,"

"Are you sure?" Will asked, disappointed that he was throwing a wrench in their plan to find El but also feeling more nauseated than he usually did. "I don't-"

"We're sure," Mike cut him off. "Right guys?"

Lucas and Dustin nodded, following closely behind.

"Yeah,"

"Definitely,"

"Do you wanna just go home?" Mike asked. "Since we're right near your house anyway?"

Will shook his head, pursing his lips to keep the motion from making him sick. "No, my mom is home. I don't... I'd rather not have to explain this to her - not yet,"

"Okay..." Mike said hesitantly. "Let's head back to my house then,"

The three boys waited a few minutes for Will to regain enough composure that he could ride his bike on his own before making their way back to the Wheeler house.

.....

Mike had all but forgotten that tonight was New Year's Eve but the silver and gold decorations throughout the house and the smell of various finger foods and desserts cooking and baking in the kitchen was a quick reminder. Silver garland was wrapped in spirals around the banisters and the house looked a bit neater, a bit straighter, than it had when he'd left that morning. Plastic banners that read "1984" in gigantic letters hung in the dining and living rooms and on the dining table were several sets of silly hats, noise-makers, and kazoes.

As the boys entered the house, Mike's mom called out from the kitchen, "Mike, is that you?"

"Yeah, Mom!" He yelled back, then whispered to his friends, "We gotta get Will downstairs without my mom noticing he doesn't feel well or she's gonna call his mom,"

The boys nodded affirmatively and followed Mike through the house and into the kitchen. They were almost to the basement door when Mike's mom turned around from the counter, baby Holly on her hip.

"Hey Mike," She said, stopping Mike in his tracks. Dustin and Lucas stealthily escorted Will downstairs without drawing much attention from Mike's mom. "Don't forget we have people coming over this evening for the New Year's Eve party,"

"Oh, um, yeah," He nodded. "I didn't forget," He totally forgot.

"Okay, good," She said, glancing at the basement door. "Are your friends staying as well?"

"Uh, yeah," Mike darted a glance at the basement, then turned back to his mom and nodded vigorously. "We're probably just gonna pick our campaign back up,"

"Okay, that's fine," Mike's mom replied. "But make sure you straighten up the basement. I went down there while you were gone and you boys left it a mess,"

Mike huffed, annoyed. "Okay,"

Mike's mom raised an eyebrow at the mildly disrespectful tone and Mike immediately noticed her expression. "Okay," He said more calmly.

Seemingly satisfied with that, Mike's mom set Holly down and turned back to the counter. "Okay, have fun," She said, adding over her shoulder, "And sometime tonight you need to put your laundry away. It's been sitting in the basket downstairs for two days,"

"Right," Mike nodded, making his way to the basement door. "Okay," He said, slipping downstairs before his mom could keep him any longer.

Will was lying on the couch by the basement with an old plastic bucket set in front of him.

"How's he doing?" Mike asked once he was at the bottom of the steps.

"I'm okay," Will gave a small smile. "I don't think I'm gonna throw up again but I still feel a little sick,"

"Okay," Mike said, trying to formulate a new plan in his mind.

"So what now?" Lucas asked, taking a seat at their D&D table. "We didn't get to check and see if the compass worked,"

"Wait a minute," Dustin said, digging into his jacket pocket and retrieving the compass. "We still can. Maybe we can't follow it at the moment but we can see if it-" He cut himself off as he watched the needle. "It's still off!"

"Really?!" Mike exclaimed, darting over to Dustin to look over his shoulder at the compass.

"Let me see that," Lucas said, jumping up from his seat and grabbing the compass. "Holy shit, you're right,"

"That's not true North!" Dustin commented.

Lucas returned the compass to Dustin. "So that means -"

"- the portal is still open!" Mike finished, his excitement billowing up inside of him.

"So now we just have to see if the compass leads us back to Hawkins Lab or if it takes us somewhere else," Dustin reasoned.

"El said the portal was in the lab," Mike said confidently.

"Why would the Chief lie to us though?" Lucas wondered, striking a difficult balance between suspicion and loyalty to the man who rescued them.

"Maybe he doesn't know it's still open," Mike guessed, shrugging.

"Or maybe -" Dustin began.

Lucas cut him off, "Don't even say it,"

Dustin glared at his friend before muttering, "Lando,"

"I *knew* you were gonna say that!" Lucas threw his hands up in the air in exasperation.

.....

Will had drifted off to sleep despite his friends' loud voices and debating. He'd never felt nauseous for this long after puking up one of those slug things. With his ventures into the Upside Down gradually lasting longer and his nausea lasting longer than usual, he started to wonder if maybe he should tell his mom about what was going on. He couldn't deny that the whole situation was freaking him out, though the first time it had happened had been the most terrifying.

It was a week after he'd gotten home from the hospital and for the first time since his return, he was left home alone for a few hours. Joyce had insisted on staying home with him for the week following his release from the hospital and everything had seemed to be improving so she had reluctantly gone back to work, repeating to Will over and over that he should call the store if he needed anything. Will was getting his strength back and his cough had all but subsided. He had never been the most athletic kid but even riding his bike for a few minutes left him feeling winded so in the immediate aftermath of his return, his friends typically stopped by his house to see him. The school had closed down for a few weeks to clean up and make repairs to the building so the boys were able to hang out together almost every day and during that time, they'd even moved their D&D game to the Byers house so that Will wouldn't be left out and they could continue their campaigns.

Will had decided to make himself a sandwich for lunch. He padded into the kitchen, careful to not move too fast or turn his head too sharply lest he become light-headed. The peanut butter was in one of the top cabinets and with Will's short stature, he couldn't quite reach so he dragged one of the kitchen chairs over to the counter and slowly climbed up. The peanut butter jar was hiding behind a box of Rice Krispies and as he reached for it, he felt a strange tingling sensation spread throughout his body, resonating in his head. Suddenly he was cold and nauseous and before he could make sense of what was happening, everything around him changed. Vines wrapped themselves around the cabinets, white particles floated through the air, his breath came out in a foggy mist, and dark brown slime covered the cereal box in front of him.

He'd screamed, losing his balance and falling from the chair, hitting

the linoleum with a thud. Before even hitting the floor, however, he was back in his house. His *real* house. No vines, no particles, no slime. It had happened in a matter of seconds and Will wondered if it had even happened at all. Maybe he had imagined it. He'd spent almost every night since returning from the Upside Down in restless nightmares that left him incapable of sleeping with the lights off. It had to be in his imagination. He was back, he was home, and according to his friends, the monster was gone. There was nothing to worry about anymore.

As Will regained his bearings, the dull ache of a bruise forming on his hip, he lifted himself into a sitting position. His head swam and a rumbling sensation fluttered through his stomach. Before he could make a move for the kitchen trash can, he retched and acid filled his mouth, followed by a solid mass that made him feeling like he was choking. He coughed, sputtering, until the object flew out of his mouth and landed on the linoleum with a slick smack, revealing itself to be some sort of spotted slug. He grimaced as it slithered across the floor, dragging a trail of brown goo behind it. What was that thing? The realization that it had been in Will's stomach was enough to make him want to vomit again but he held back, instead quickly reaching into a drawer in the counter and producing a knife. He crept after the slug and came down hard on its body with the paring knife in his hand, eliciting an unnerving squeal from the creature as it convulsed and eventually stilled.

For weeks after that, the encounters with the Upside Down and the vomiting of slugs occurred here and there, always alarming Will but he didn't want to worry anyone. He'd always taken care of himself and for as much as his family struggled with regular things like money problems and his parents fighting, he always tried to stay under the radar. This was usually easy enough because he'd always been a quiet, well-behaved kid who tried to stay out of other people's way for the most part. Disappearing into the Upside Down had all but completely drained his mother and brother mentally, emotionally, and physically. Just as they were finally beginning to return to normal, he didn't want to put them through that stress again. Besides, these were probably just residual effects. He coughed up tons of slime in the hospital - this had to be a similar side effect. And seeing the Upside Down? Had to be his imagination. Those encounters

happened so quickly it was like blinking and imagining a memory. There was no reason to worry his family over something like that. Everything was fine.

.....

The suit was familiar but somehow more uncomfortable than he remembered. The large, gaping hole in front of him oozed and he could faintly see the other side through the pink membrane covering the opening. His arm was heavy with the weight of the suit as he lifted his hand to touch the darker membranes criss-crossing over the hole. Large vines wrapped around the room and if he stared long enough, it almost seemed like the membranes before him were breathing.

Two scientists flanked him, also wearing the protective suits that limited your peripheral vision and would induce a panic attack in anyone remotely claustrophobic.

He wondered what those kids had actually been doing out in the woods by the lab's fence. They were far enough away to plausibly be innocent but he knew these kids. He knew they missed their friend and unlike most people in this town, they knew about what had *actually* happened to Will.

No one was supposed to know about what happened last month, nor were they supposed to know that the lab had had any involvement in Will's disappearance or return home. Only those who'd been directly involved knew the truth.

That was exactly why he was suspicious.

If he was right, they probably wanted to find their friend. How they intended to do that, he wasn't sure, but he knew that the wrong misstep could cost them big time.

Besides, he was already on the case. His gut had told him Eleven was still around somewhere in the Upside Down and overhearing the researchers at the lab had only solidified his suspicion. Now the only issue was finding Eleven and keeping her discovery from the other lab employees.

"Ready?" One of the researchers at his side asked, their voice sounding mechanical through the radio in their helmet.

Hopper stepped forward, pushing aside the sticky membranes that cover the entrance. "Let's go," He said as he moved forward, slipping through the opening and into the Upside Down.

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Video 011-21

The footage on the camera was dark, filmed in night-vision and showing a small room with one door and no windows. Nothing moved for several minutes but warbled screaming could be heard in the distance. The heavy metal door opens suddenly and a man dressed in white pants and a white shirt appears in the doorway. A small girl is at his side, writhing against his grip on her wrist. Her head is shaved with only the slightest hint of dark hair at her scalp and wearing nothing but a hospital gown. She screams and cries as she tries desperately to peel herself away from him.

"Papa!" She screamed down the hallway. Her voice is high-pitched and breaks with each syllable.

Another guard appears, forcefully turning her around as the other guard shoves her into the room. She falls to the floor hard, scrambling to get back up as the metal door slams shut, coating the room in darkness once again.

"Papa!" She screams again, her voice breaking as she beats her hands against the door, too short to see through the small window at the top of the door. "No!" She yells again and again, her voice gnarled and in anguish.

She beats against the four walls of her enclosure until one of her hands started to bleed and she succumbs to her cries. Leaning against the wall, she sobs, her shoulders shaking with every breath in the darkness.

"Papa," She whimpers more plaintively as her head rests against the metal wall. She pulls her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth as she buries her face in her lap. Her cries are muffled and in the grainy footage she begins to blend in with the splotches of grey, white, and black in the video.

She sits like this for three hours, finally falling asleep on the floor, her legs pulled close to her as her head rests on the tiles. She slips her legs into her hospital gown, shivering as she drifts off into a restless sleep.

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"And every demon wants his pound of flesh but I like to keep some things to myself. I like to keep my issues drawn, it's always darkest before the dawn..."

6. Ain't No Sunshine

[A/N: Hey all! Thanks for the reviews! I always love hearing your feedback and am glad to know you're enjoying the songs! I'll keep doing them then :)

D/C: (Because I can't remember if I've done this yet or not?) In case anyone didn't realize this, I don't own *Stranger Things* or the characters in it. Go figure...]

Chapter 6: Ain't No Sunshine (by Bill Withers)

"Ain't no sunshine when she's gone, it's not warm when she's away. Ain't no sunshine when she's gone, and she's always gone too long, anytime she goes away..."

.....

By late evening the Wheeler house had filled with dozens of friends and neighbors eager to celebrate the coming of the new year. Will had rested on the couch in the basement for most of the afternoon, his friends patiently reading comic books and hanging out all the while. Mike balanced his concern for his friend with the antsy anxiousness he felt to find Eleven. All he really knew, or at least that he thought he knew, was that El was alive in the Upside Down and that bad men were after her again. He hated the thought of her being alone and scared and it reminded him of how they'd found her on that rainy night last month. He still couldn't believe that he could grow so close to someone so quickly but something about her had been magnetic. She fascinated him and as they'd spent more time together, his infatuation had only grown.

From the basement they could hear the increasing sounds of more voices as party guests arrived. Mike's mom loved hosting events like this and often over-baked but there was no chance of anyone leaving the Wheeler home hungry.

"Mike!" His mom had called down the basement around 8 pm. Will was fast asleep on the couch and Dustin and Lucas were trying to have a quiet argument about who would win in a fight between The

Justice League and The Avengers. *"Come say hi to your Uncle Percy and Aunt Sue!"*

"Be right back, guys," Mike sighed, setting his comic book down on the D&D table and taking the stairs two at a time. He would have much rather been out searching for Eleven but he was quite limited at the moment. Even if Will was awake and feeling better, it was getting later and the winds had already picked up, indicating the storm was rolling in. There was no way his mom would let him go back out at this point.

Mike weaved his way through groups of adults chatting in search of his mom, eventually finding her in the foyer with his aunt and uncle. Uncle Percy was his dad's older brother and always called him "Sport". Aunt Sue smelled strongly of French perfume and insisted on pinching his cheeks, telling him how "handsome" he was becoming every time she saw him. Mike sidled up between his mom and uncle, strategically out of his aunt's reach.

He smiled politely as his uncle peppered him with questions about the science fair and his aunt gushed over how tall he'd gotten since Easter earlier that year. Looking around, Mike took note of the individuals who were there. Most of them were old friends of his parents and his dad's coworkers. He recognized a few neighbors, including Lucas and Dustin's parents. With everything going on with Will and Eleven, Mike had completely forgotten about this party and apparently, so had Lucas and Dustin. Scanning the room, Mike noticed Nancy sitting on the sofa, tucked into the crook of Steve's arm as they watched the TV coverage of Times Square, though the ball wouldn't be dropping for another few hours. After everything that had happened back in November, it was surprising to see his sister still dating Steve Harrington. Considering the horrors they had experienced that week, they'd developed a newfound appreciation and respect for one another but there were some things about Nancy he probably just would never understand.

When he was finally able to peel himself away from awkward family chit-chat, Mike retreated back to the kitchen to find Lucas and Dustin flocked to the appetizers and desserts, each carrying a plate piled high with sweet and savory treats. The counters were covered with trays and dishes of varying shapes and sizes and the options ranged

from mini quiches to assorted fruit tarts to brownies and everything in between.

"What are you guys doing?" Mike asked, crossing the threshold into the kitchen.

"Uh, isn't it obvious?" Lucas responded sarcastically as he balanced a third apple tart on his already teetering plate.

Dustin stuffed a mini pig-in-a-blanket into his mouth before loading his plate with three more. "We're staying up late, we're at a party, and we're taking care of our friend who *just so happens* to be tight-rope walking across dimensions," He said, one cheek stuffed with food, then swallowed. "*We need sustenance!*"

Mike sighed, rolling his eyes good-naturedly before grabbing a paper plate and loading up on his own stash of goodies.

"Hey, Will's up!" Lucas said as the boys carefully made their way downstairs, balancing cups of soda in the crooks of their arms and loaded plates in their hands.

"Hey guys," Will smiled, sitting up with one arm supporting his weight, as the three other boys all stepped down into the basement. Dustin carefully set the two plates he was carrying down on the table.

"Do you want anything to eat?" Mike asked as he pushed a comic book aside to make room on the table for the plate and drinks he was carrying. He tucked the book and a few D&D character pieces under the table so that Lucas could add his own plates to the assortment.

"Sure," Will said, tossing the throw blanket off of his legs and moving to sit at the table. "I'm sorry I kind of messed up our plans today, Mike,"

Mike smiled despite himself. He didn't want Will to feel bad for being sick - it wasn't his fault, after all. "Don't worry about it," He assured his friend as he popped a bacon-wrapped cheese ball into his mouth. "Besides, tomorrow is New Year's Day and everything will be closed so we can just try first thing in the morning,"

Lucas paused, an apple tart en route to his mouth as he looked

dubiously at Mike, "You are not seriously suggesting what I think you are..."

Mike shrugged, "Everything closes on New Years, *including* government," He picked up another cheese ball from the plate in the middle of the table. "Tomorrow's our best chance,"

"-At breaking into a federal facility," Dustin added, disconcerted.

"Do you guys have a better suggestion?" Mike challenged, looking around the table at his friends. "If we're right, El has been stuck in the Upside Down for more than a *month* now. She literally saved us from *being killed!*" His voice rose and fell dramatically as he gestured animatedly. No one said anything - he *did* have a point after all. "*Multiple times!* We can't just leave her in there,"

"Okay," Lucas said, putting his hands up as though to slow the progression of Mike's developing monologue. "But even if the portal is still open, and it *is* in the lab, how are we supposed to get *inside?*"

"We'll figure it out," Mike answered vaguely and his friends' faces fell in dismay. "The *point* is that she's a part of the party and no one gets left behind, *right?*"

Dustin and Lucas exchanged glances before nodding. "Right,"

"Okay," Mike said, seemingly satisfied with his friends' response. "So we'll leave tomorrow morning and head to the lab. If El found a way out before, we should be able to find a way *in*,"

His friends nodded their agreement. Will was mostly quiet during this exchange. He hadn't had the chance to get to know El personally but he vaguely remembered her voice speaking to him when he was in the Upside Down. He was aware of the fact that she had played a huge role in his rescue and he'd heard all of the stories of how she'd saved Mike and Dustin from Troy and James, how she'd flipped the government agents' van when they were being chased down, and how she'd put herself in danger to stop the Monster from killing them all. Even though he didn't really *know* her, he really wanted to so he was just as dedicated to finding her as the rest of his friends. Though, maybe not *as* much as Mike.

As time passed, the boys decided to continue their current D&D campaign until midnight. They hadn't played in a couple of days so they were more than happy to escape back into the facade of normalcy. Mike hoped the game would serve as a distraction, his anxiety at the thought of what El could be going through at any given moment felt like a monster breathing down his neck.

"A beholder appears from the depths of the dark, dripping cave! His central eye glares at you menacingly as his eye stalks prepare their attack!" Mike narrated, finally relaxing enough to get into the game. "Will, your action!"

"Fireball the son of a bitch!" Lucas exclaimed loudly as Will hesitated, cradling the die in his hands.

"Cast -" Dustin began but Mike slammed his hands on the table.

"The beholder takes no pity on your puny human hesitation!" Mike screamed. "His eye stalks turn to you, ready -"

"Uh, cast mirror image!" Will exclaimed hurriedly as he tossed the die onto the table, the boys watching it spin eagerly before it finally came to rest.

"It worked!" Lucas exclaimed brightly. "He rolled an 11!"

Dustin darted a glance Mike whose face had visibly faltered slightly.

"Yeah, that's not awkward..." Dustin commented sarcastically.

"What?" Mike startled as though coming out of a deep train of thought. "N-no, it's fine," He shook off their concerned looks, insisting on continuing. "The beholder's death ray destroys the duplicate and you're able to make it out of the cave safely," He said, his voice a little less animated, a little more distant than it'd once been.

The boys continued their game, unaware of the time that had passed until Nancy's voice echoed down the basement staircase.

"Mike, the ball's about to drop!"

Mike looked at his watch. It was 11:55.

"Coming!" He called out as his friends stood up from the table.

Dustin walked over to the back door and peeked through the curtain on the window. "Dude, it's snowing like crazy out there!"

"Let me see!" Will said, eagerly rushing to the window. The landscape outside was already blanketed with a thick layer of snow as heavy snowflakes blew through swaying trees on rough gusts of wind. "Wow, I wonder how much we're gonna get,"

"I think my mom said it's supposed to snow until the middle of the night," Lucas said as the boys headed upstairs. "So probably like, ten inches or something like that,"

"No way," Mike disagreed as the four boys made their way into the living room where much of the party had congregated. He noticed that the party had thinned out in attendance, probably due to the storm and people deciding to go home early. Dustin and Lucas went over to their parents to check in as Will and Mike stood by the doorway. Will's mom was working a late night shift and Jonathan had said earlier that week that he thought it'd be "too awkward" to go to the party with Nancy and Steve being there. Fighting off a faceless monster was no problem but apparently all three of them attending a social function together was just too much to ask.

As everyone eagerly watched the TV, a ticker in the corner counting down the minutes until midnight, Mike's mind wandered to thoughts of El. What if she wasn't in the Upside Down but she was actually out in the storm? Would she be okay? Maybe he could get out of the house and look for her tonight. No, there was no way. Everyone would be up late, his mom most of all, and it'd be obvious if he and his friends disappeared tonight. Besides, he could already feel the heaviness of sleep settling on him as he fought to keep sharp. Caught between anxious worry and helpless exhaustion, he could do nothing but hope for tomorrow to be successful. He tried to think more positively. He imagined finding El and bringing her home. She could live with them and go to school with them. He'd show her all the things he never got to during the week she was here. Star Wars and the arcade and with all the snow they were getting, he could teach her to make a snowman. He could imagine her standing beside him amidst the crowd of party-goers, her small smile making his heart

swell. And when the clock struck midnight, maybe he would give her a New Year's kiss but probably not because literally *everyone* would see and that would be completely embarrassing.

Mike was finally pulled from his thoughts as the people around him began to shout.

"Five!"

"Four!"

"Three!"

"Two!"

"One!"

"Happy New Year!"

.....

Trudging through the dark and dismal landscape, Hopper's mind whirled with questions and potentials. How could he find El on his own? What would he do if and when he found her?

The researchers escorting him through the Upside Down were harmless enough. One was a seasoned biologist from the NIH named Linda and the other, a recent graduate from Hopkins named Kevin. Neither had been connected to the events that transpired last month but that didn't make him trust them.

The trio moved through the alternate version of their town, stepping over vines in their clunky protective gear and stopping periodically as Kevin and Linda collected samples of the decaying foliage. Not even twenty minutes into their venture and they'd already managed to secure several vials and plastic bags of the mysterious brown slime, pieces of vines, and a few other strange plant-like specimens.

Hopper looked around, his flashlight illuminating only a small area in front of them due to the thick fog. White particles floated by the screen of his helmet and he remembered that it was supposed to snow tonight. Getting home in that mess would be a bitch.

"What is this?" Kevin asked, stepping toward a large, yellow, egg-like structure.

"Fascinating," Linda breathed as she pulled another plastic bag out of the satchel around her waist, carving out a piece of the structure to be tested back at the lab. "We'll find out, won't we?"

Hopper largely remained quiet. He wasn't a scientist and didn't pretend to be one. The only reason he knew that he was even picked to go on these excursions was because of his previous success in exploring them and the fact that he owed a debt. He'd discussed the terms with some of the lab's big wigs last month and they'd reached the agreement that he would assist with their study of the Upside Down, *and* help them find "the girl".

Most of the top employees of the lab had died in the middle school back in November but several remained. Many of the lower-level researchers had transferred, not wanting to be connected to such a scandal, a few of the higher-ranked agents and researchers had stayed on to manage damage control and protect the lab's image, and the rest of the staff had been replaced by eager, oblivious newbies who wanted a shot at working at the distinguished Hawkins National Laboratory. Without Dr. Brenner, the lab was being run by some of the top agents who knew about Eleven's existence and the deal Hopper had made. They'd swooped in to provide a cover story for the massacre in the middle school - something about an undercover operation and being ambushed by an unknown group of assailants, possibly 'commies'. The whole story had sounded ridiculous but the papers ate it up and with the re-emergence of Will Byers, the lab's plight had largely lost the spotlight. Everyone had wanted to know about the "boy who came back to life". Even that had had to be explained away and the lab's top guys were on that, too, with Hopper involved to add credibility. Something about a mix-up in the identification process. Someone who "looked like Will had been discovered and was mistaken for the missing Byers boy". That was certainly one way of putting it.

He'd even had to lie to Joyce and the boys about the portal. While he couldn't make a public statement for obvious reasons, his supervisors had demanded that he tell everyone who had been previously involved that the portal had closed following the events of last

month. It was easy enough to make up a story. At the time, everyone had been caught up in the fact that Eleven had apparently disappeared with the monster when she killed it. Convincing them to believe that in doing so, the portal in the lab had closed, didn't seem like a stretch. That would allow the lab the privacy to continue their research into the mysterious dimension while also protecting everyone who'd known about its existence from the government wanting to permanently silence them.

Hopper looked around, marveling at the strange yet disconcerting environment he found himself in. Everything looked like home but was starkly different and that was more than a little unsettling. Still, he moved forward. He'd seen enough in his time as a cop to put up a barrier between himself and the things he witnessed. He didn't care too much about exploring this place but when it came to the girl - Eleven - he couldn't live with the idea of turning her over to the government again. He'd made that decision once before and the guilt had wracked him day and night ever since. If given the chance to save her or sell her out once again, he knew what he would do.

That's why he kept an eye out for any signs that she might have passed by. He suspected she had been taking the food out of the dropbox in the woods so he kept his eyes peeled for used plastic wrap, a Tupperware lid - anything that could alert him to her presence. Still, they were far enough away from the woods that he wasn't surprised to not find any remains of the food he'd left. If he was going to search for her, he had to go further into the Upside Down and he would have to do it alone.

"There are a lot of these things," Kevin commented as they passed by yet another egg-like structure. They were large, almost reaching Hopper's hip in height.

Linda reached for her satchel, retrieving another specimen bag. "This is my last one," She said as she cut a piece of the yellow mass and secured it in the bag. "We should be getting back to the lab soon anyway,"

As Hopper watched these two scientists gush over the "incredible" and "fascinating" biological formations before them, he couldn't help but think of his daughter, Sarah. The ironic thing was that she used

to love science and would have probably gotten a kick out of being on an exploration like this - not that he would have ever allowed it. Still, it seemed strange that he would be the one plodding through this mysterious land.

As the three of them reached the portal that would lead them back into the lab, Hopper stole one last look back into the darkness. If she really was out there, he had to get back here as soon as possible, without the government science lackeys around to screw anything up or sell him out. He couldn't let them find her first. He knew what they would do if they did.

.....

"Wonder this time where she's gone, wonder if she's gone to stay. Ain't no sunshine when she's gone, and this house just ain't no home, anytime she goes away..."

[A/N: Okay, confession time: I know almost nothing about D&D lol I've never played, though I'm vaguely aware of how it works. I had to research monsters and spells and stuff on the interwebs so if anything doesn't make sense, please let me know? And aside from that, feedback is always welcome and appreciated! What do you love? What do you hate? What do you think will happen? What do you WANT to happen? I wanna know! XD Thanks for reading!]

7. These Dreams

[A/N: So this update came pretty fast! I probably won't be able to update again until after the holiday but for now, enjoy! I hope you like this chapter and for those of you that celebrate it, Happy Thanksgiving!]

Chapter 7: These Dreams (by Heart)

"Darkness on the edge, shadows where I stand. I search for the time on a watch with no hands. I want to see you clearly, come closer than this. But all I remember are the dreams in the mist..."

.....

The snow was still coming down at 3 am that morning. Mike sat by the window, arms crossed over the windowsill as he watched the flakes descend onto the quiet, white landscape. By now, the footprints from party attendees had long since been covered by additional snow, the traces of their paths all but erased. Mike could feel the cold air seeping through the window and it sent a chill up his arms leaving him with goosebumps.

Lucas and Dustin were fast asleep on opposite sides of the couch, each boys' subtle snoring almost harmonizing the other in a cacophonous melody. Will was nestled into the La-Z-Boy, a crocheted blanket twice his size all but swallowing him up. Mike's sleeping bag was left haphazardly in the middle of the floor. He'd tried to fall asleep for the past two hours but with no luck. He couldn't stop thinking about El - a mixture of worry and excitement raging a battle within him such that he wasn't sure how to feel. On one hand, he could think of everything that could possibly be wrong. She could be stuck out in the snow somewhere, freezing cold and alone. She could have been captured by the bad men. Maybe they wouldn't be able to find her after all and she'd forever be left to think that he'd given up on her - that he'd broken his promise. Or, worst of all, she could actually be gone. But then his more optimistic side would gain control of his mind, daydreaming of going to the Spring Fling this year (since they'd missed the Snow Ball), maybe he'd make a Valentine for her in art class or take her to see her first movie. She

could get a bike of her own and they could ride around the neighborhood, though he'd probably have to teach her to ride one first, right? There was still so much he didn't know about her, still so much he wanted to show her, and the thought of spending that time never failed to bring a smile to his face.

"Argh!" A grunt from Lucas over on the couch startled Mike out of his thoughts as he witnessed Dustin kick Lucas in his sleep, muttering unintelligibly.

They normally would have crashed in the basement as that was their typical hang-out spot but Mike's mom had offered the pull-out couch downstairs to his aunt and uncle so they wouldn't have to drive home in the storm. Boy had he gotten an earful when his mom went downstairs and found that not only was the basement even messier than it had been before, what with the addition of several plates of partially finished snacks and desserts strewn around the room, Mike had also forgotten to take his laundry back up to his room. Once his mother was finished chewing him out for disregarding her simple requests, he'd grumbled the whole way back to the living room where his friends were waiting, already on the verge of passing out from exhaustion.

Only a few more hours and they'd be on their way to search for El. Though his body ached for sleep, Mike's mind was wide-awake, whirring and buzzing with thoughts and memories that left him spinning from the emotional whirlwind.

He finally peeled himself away from the window and the mesmerizing enchantment of the winter wonderland outside and climbed back into his sleeping bag, fluffing up the pillow he'd stolen from his bedroom upstairs as he let his head sink back. He hadn't realized just how tired he had become until his eyes fluttered closed and his mind quieted for the first time all day.

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He was out in the woods again. Leaves of varying colors, decaying and drying up into crunchy shells of their former selves, were scattered amongst the trees. Beside him, a drainage pipe. Behind him, a tall wire fence. He immediately recognized Mirkwood.

"El?" He called out. Was she here? This area didn't resemble the Upside Down, or what he knew of it, at all. It was dark out, but the typical darkness of nightfall. It was chilly, but crisp like an autumn apple, not the penetrating cold of winter or the eerie chill of the Upside Down. "Where are you?" Mike looked around for any sign of the young girl.

Suddenly, a loud alarm began to go off from the building beyond the fence - the lab. Mike quickly turned in the direction of the sound to see red alarm lights flashing and the other lights in the building rapidly blinking in and out. Before he could register the scene before him, a scrawny young girl emerged from the drainage pipe beside him, her eyes wide with fear as she looked back at the building beyond the fence.

"El!" Mike exclaimed but the girl didn't react. Instead, she crawled out, her body just a hair more narrow than the width of the pipe. Mike's face contorted in confusion. Why wasn't she responding to him? "What are you doing?"

Clad in a hospital gown, the girl pulled herself from the pipe as the end of her gown caught on a stray nail hanging from the edge, pulling her back slightly. She yelped, panting hard as she tore away from it, leaving a scrap of fabric behind. Finally on solid footing outside of the pipe, she turned back to the lab in the distance, her chest rapidly rising and falling with anxious breaths.

"El, what's going on?" Mike tried to ask but she never turned to him, never even flinched at the sound of his voice. Instead, she turned on her heel, her feet barren against the sharp twigs and rocks beneath her and ran off into the woods until her frame disappeared in the darkness between the trees.

"El!" He yelled, cupping his hands over his mouth to amplify the sound. "El, where'd you go? Come back! Eleven!"

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"Eleven!"

"Mike, wake up!"

"El, come back!"

"Dude!"

Suddenly Dustin was shaking Mike by the shoulders and as he slowly opened his eyes, sleep still holding his lids partially shut, he could see Lucas and Will also crouched on the floor beside them, their eyebrows raised in concern and confusion.

"Wha-what?" Mike murmured as the world began to come back together. He was on the floor, in his sleeping bag. The lights were off and the living room was otherwise dark sans the light of a rising sun peeking in through the windows. "What's going on?"

"That's what we should be asking *you*," Lucas said. "You just started yelling about El in your sleep and woke us all up,"

"You sounded really upset," Will added quietly from his sitting position on the La-Z-Boy. "Dustin woke you up so your mom wouldn't hear you and come down to ask about it,"

"What time is it?" Mike asked, shrugging Dustin from his shoulders as he sat up, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

"5:30," Will replied sleepily just as Mike glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Guys, I had the weirdest dream," Mike said, steadily becoming more alert.

"Another one?" Lucas raised an eyebrow as a yawn escaped him.

"Yeah, I mean, well, no -" Mike corrected himself. "-Sort of. It was weird. It wasn't in the Upside Down. El was crawling out of some pipe out by Mirkwood," He paused, crestfallen. "She looked really scared,"

"Did she say anything?" Dustin asked, sitting back on his haunches. By this point, all four boys were wide awake despite the time.

Mike shook his head. "It was like she couldn't hear me," He said, adding, "I could only watch,"

"So what does it mean?" Will wondered aloud.

"I dunno," Mike shrugged. "But we need to get out there and figure out what's going on," He said definitively, the terrified look on El's face still branded in his mind's eye.

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He'd second-guessed himself at first. He couldn't have seen what he thought he saw. He'd never had such luck that a lead just blatantly laid itself out right in front of his face. There was always some detective work involved, some blood, sweat, and tears that went into cracking a tough case.

But he could have sworn, as he'd glanced back into the Upside Down, right before returning to the lab, that he'd seen something. Some strange shadow in the distance to the left of the gate that he hadn't noticed when they'd ventured out into that unsettlingly familiar dimension. There was something out in the grass, obscured by the trees and the darkness and even if it was nothing, his gut told him to investigate. The magnetic pull of the potential clue was agonizing to ignore but he couldn't spark the interest of Kevin and Linda so he kept quiet, quickly darting his gaze back to the portal before they could notice his distraction.

He'd spent the better part of the night thinking about it. Was it a shoe? A piece of clothing? Maybe the remains of some of the Tupperware he'd been leaving out in the woods for weeks? Or was it wishful thinking? Could he be imagining things that could allow him to hold onto some glimmer of hope that he hadn't sold that poor girl out to her demise? To assuage the guilt he felt at choosing one child's life over another's. Or was this his second chance at saving a young girl who had once trusted him to protect her from harm? He couldn't protect Sarah. He couldn't save her. But maybe he could find redemption if he could find Eleven.

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Video 011-25

The young girl looked a bit older in this video. Maybe in another life she'd be bringing home her first spelling test or playing on the jungle gym at recess. Instead she sat, stoic and staring distantly at the blank white wall

in front of her. The wired helmet of the electroencephalograph rested on her head with barely peach fuzz barely protecting her scalp from where the more narrow edges of the device would dig into her skin.

Her hands rested on the metal table in front of her, her gaze never lifting the way an inquisitive youngster her age normally would. She sat motionless as several pairs of eyes watched from beyond the two-way mirror in front of her. The EEG's needle scribbles waves of varying widths on a paper printout that continuously rolled out onto the floor.

"Very good, Eleven," A voice said over an intercom and the young girl relaxed back into her chair, still moving with the delicate and cautious precision of a soldier in a minefield. "We have one more thing to do today,"

The girl looked to the door as the tall white-haired man entered. She didn't cower away from his touch when he rested his palm on her shoulder, nor did she respond to the seemingly innocuous gesture of affection.

"You should be happy," Papa said, the positive words sounding chilly as they left his lips. "We're learning a lot from you, my girl. We're going to change the world," He knelt down beside her, looking into her face though she avoided his eye contact. "And it's with your help that we'll get there, do you know that?" He lifted her chin to meet her gaze and she turned hesitantly, barely glancing at him before her eyes fell to the floor once again. "I'm very proud of you," He said and the hint of a smile flashed across her face before quickly disappearing behind wary eyes.

Two orderlies, dressed in white, entered the room. One stood by the wall, crossing his arms, as the other placed a small metal cage on the table in front of the girl. Inside, a small white mouse darted from side to side, sniffing the air between the wire bars holding him captive as little feet poked their way through the gaps. The girl watched, her face brightening, as the small creature scurried through the bedding that lined the cage, its energy and inquisitiveness in complete contradiction to her withdrawn, quiet demeanor. Her lips curled up in a toothy smile, revealing several missing baby teeth, as she poked a finger into the cage, watching with glee as the tiny mouse sniffed her.

"Eleven," Papa said, startling the girl out of her reverie and she immediately sunk back into the chair. "I want you to do something for

me,"

She turned to him, then followed his gaze back to the mouse.

"Using only your mind," He gestured to her, lightly touching her on the temple but eliciting a wince nonetheless. "I want you to kill this mouse,"

Her eyes immediately widened and a glimmer of tears shone through the grainy footage of the video. She vehemently shook her head as tears slid down her cheeks. "No, Papa," She whimpered.

"Yes, Eleven," Papa said sternly. "This is part of our research. You have an incredible gift - you must learn to hone these skills appropriately,"

Eleven turned back to the mouse who was now sitting by the side of the cage closest to her, sniffing the air in her direction. The young girl erupted into a deep, throaty cry.

"Eleven," Papa warned as he tried to gain control but she was becoming hysterical, her eyes clenching tightly shut and her head shook so forcefully that the EEG helmet slid off and fell to the floor. "Eleven!" He said more sternly but she did not respond. He exchanged a look with the orderlies and nodded toward her.

The orderly who had carried the cage in stepped forward to grab her but she slipped through his grasp, crying all the while. The other orderly moved in to assist as Papa stepped back and watched. The two men struggled with the girl as she writhed in their grips, thrashing about in her chair. Her cries escalated to screams as she fought them off, their hands pressed tight into her tiny arms. The tighter they held on, the harder she fought, all the while becoming louder and louder. Finally, one of the orderlies reached around, attempting to pull her from the chair, and as his forearm crossed in front of her face, she bit down. Hard.

The orderly groaned in pain before instinctively pulling his arm from the girl's reach, simultaneously shoving her head back in the process. She growled angrily, her brow furrowing as she stared the man down and within seconds, the orderly had flown across the floor and slammed into the wall.

A flash of movement from behind the window looking into the room and a

middle-aged woman entered. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and was wearing dress pants and a long overcoat as she swiftly closed the gap between herself and the young girl, pressing a small black device into the girl's side. The girl immediately jumped, crying out in pain as her body spasmed at the sudden jolt, before falling limp against the chair. Her head rolled back and her facial expression was vacant as the orderly she'd mentally thrown across the room stood up on wobbly legs. Draped over the chair, she didn't fight anymore, though her face was still splotted with crying and small whimpers still escaped her.

"Take her back to her room," Papa instructed and one of the orderlies scooped the girl up into his arms. "We'll try again later,"

Papa and the blonde woman watched as the orderlies carried the limp, crying girl out of the room, closing the door behind them.

"You had no right to interfere, Connie," Papa said evenly, never looking at the woman standing beside him.

"She attacked an orderly," Connie replied smoothly, unfazed by Papa's authoritative tone. "That can't happen,"

"And if her powers are affected by your recklessness, you will be the one responsible," He shot back, meeting her gaze. "We still don't know the extent of her abilities, let alone what factors can influence them one way or another," He moved to the door, resting his hand on the knob. "You should hope that you haven't impeded our study with your bravado," He said before slipping out of the room.

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Knowing that snow was on its way, the boys had hid their bikes in the Wheeler's garage to keep them from being buried or rusting. As they ventured out into the snowy yard, bundled up tight in thick winter coats and boots, it was obvious they'd made the right decision. Light, powdery snow reached their ankles, making a deep squishing sound with every step they took. The plows hadn't been out to clear the streets and the sun had barely risen over the horizon, casting a warm glow against the cool, shimmering landscape. The air was still and quiet as most people were still asleep in their homes.

"Looks like we're walkin'," Dustin commented, shifting the weight of his backpack as he pulled his compass from the depths of his coat pocket.

"Great," Lucas grumbled as the boys began their trek.

"What's your compass say, Dustin?" Mike asked as the foursome trudged along.

Dustin pointed off to the right, "This way," He said, taking the lead. "It's still off, obviously,"

"Mine too," Mike nodded, comforted by the fact that he had some confirmation that they were onto something. Everything wasn't normal and this proved it.

As the boys made their way back to Mirkwood, checking for confirmation from their compasses along the way, Will did his best to subdue the growing rumbling in his stomach. He wondered if eating would have any effect on the weird symptoms he'd been having. He knew you were supposed to eat food with some medicines and that sometimes if you didn't eat in the morning, it would cause a stomachache. The thought of food, however, made him feel worse so he quickly tried to distract himself.

"So does anyone have any ideas of what we can do when we get there?" Will asked as the boys approached the road that would lead them to Mirkwood, their compasses confirming the accuracy of their movements all the way.

"So if it is in the lab, we might be able to climb over the fence," Lucas offered, a layer of doubt still sprinkled over his words.

"Really?" Mike replied curiously. "How?"

Dustin's eyes widened. "Isn't it like, electrified?"

"There's this tree that kind of hangs over the fence a little bit," Lucas explained. "I climbed it when I went looking for the portal before. Back when Will was missing,"

"Okay," Mike said, weighing the option. "Let's check that out when we

get there,"

Heavy gusts of wind swept past, distorting their voices and whipping their hair around as they left the road and entered the woods, following the perimeter of the fence that surrounded the lab.

"Do you think we'll be able to get a good enough grip?" Will asked, looking up at the trees they passed along the way. "It's gonna be slippery with all the snow,"

"True," Lucas acknowledged. "We'll have to see, I guess,"

"Okay, the portal is definitely still inside the lab," Dustin said, stopping and facing the building as the needle of his compass settled, pointing directly to it.

"Whoa!" Mike exclaimed under his breath, stopping in his tracks as he looked in the opposite direction.

"What?" Lucas asked, stepping up beside his friend and looking around.

"That's the pipe I saw in my dream!" Mike pointed straight ahead and Lucas trained his eyes to see what his friend was pointing at.

"What pipe?" Lucas asked incredulously. "I don't see anything,"

"Oh I see!" Dustin exclaimed, trotting ahead through the snow as the other tree raced to follow him. "Right over there,"

Obscured by several inches of snow, a drainage pipe wide enough for a child to fit through was positioned just a short distance away from the fence. Mike stooped down in front of it, peering into the darkness that theoretically led to the other side.

"So what happened in your dream?" Dustin asked as the other three boys crouched down to examine the pipe. "You said El crawled out of this thing?"

"Yeah,"

"And this wasn't in the Upside Down?" Will clarified.

"No, it was like..." Mike paused. He really wasn't sure what to make of his dream. "I'm not sure... I don't think she was talking to me like before though, you know?"

"Are you sure she didn't like, rub some of her powers off on you or something while she was here?" Dustin chuckled.

"No, Dustin," Mike rolled his eyes. "How could she even do that?"

"I dunno!" Dustin shrugged, standing back up. "I don't know how she does half the shit she's done but she did it,"

"Okay guys," Lucas interrupted. "If we wanna get inside, we should probably make a decision before the whole neighborhood wakes up. Holiday or not, I'm not trying to get caught,"

"Lucas is right," Mike stepped away from the pipe. "Should we try and go through the pipe?"

"Uh, you guys," Dustin hesitated. "Even without a collarbone, I'm still not sure I could fit through that thing..."

"Okay..." Mike said thoughtfully. "Maybe the tree will work,"

"That's just over here," Lucas said, leading them a few yards away to a tree with a thick trunk and a wide branch that reached out to the fence. Part of it had been cut off such that the branch only grazed the edge of the top of the fence. "Somebody cut it!"

"Big surprise," Dustin said sarcastically. "If they're gonna lie about the portal, of course they'll cut off the tree branch that conveniently drops down onto their property,"

"But then how do we get *in*?" Mike asked, becoming frustrated.

As the boys deliberated, their impatience growing and their cold-tolerance deteriorating, the wind whipped harshly at their face as it whistled through the trees. They never heard footsteps approaching in the snow. Nor did they see a tall figure appear from beyond the thick throngs of tree trunks.

"*What do you kids think you're doing?*"

.....

*"These dreams that sleep when it's cold outside, every moment I'm awake,
the further I'm away..."*

8. Every Breath You Take

[A/N: GUYS. I had so much trouble getting this out for some reason lol ADHD was kicking in hard earlier and then all of a sudden, I had a thousand words. Boom. Alright so, we're getting into some exciting stuff here! Can't wait to hear your thoughts. Thank you so much for the feedback you provide and just for reading in general! If you like what you see here, please review/favorite/follow! I love hearing predictions/thoughts/reactions/emotions/suggestions/whatever! :) Oh, and I hope everyone who celebrates Thanksgiving had a nice holiday!]

Chapter 8: Every Breath You Take (by The Police)

"Since you've gone, I been lost without a trace. I dream at night, I can only see your face. I look around but it's you I can't replace, I feel so cold and I long for your embrace..."

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"Jesus!" Dustin exclaimed as all four boys jumped, spinning around in the direction of the voice.

"Hi Chief," Will squeaked out.

"Okay..." Hopper said slowly, the hint of annoyance in his voice. "I'll say it again, *'what the hell are you boys doing out here?'*"

"We were just, uh-" Mike began, faltering over his words as he tried to come up with an excuse on the spot.

"Taking a walk," Lucas offered.

"It was a New Year's resolution!" Dustin burst out, a little too excitedly.

Hopper squinted suspiciously at the boys, crossing his arms over his chest and giving them a deadpanned look. "Cut the crap," He said simply and the boys immediately deflated.

The four exchanged looks and Mike asked softly, his voice low,

"Should we just tell him?"

"Hell no!" Dustin whispered harshly.

"Do we have any other option?" Lucas countered.

"Come on," Hopper demanded. "Spit it out!"

Mike exhaled sharply before turning back to Hopper. "We're trying to find El," He said, shrugging his shoulders.

Hopper pursed his lips, looking over the other three boys who were largely silent.

"I thought you kids said you saw her get vaporized," He said, eyeing them thoughtfully.

"We did," Lucas replied.

Dustin jumped in, "But Will -"

Mike elbowed his friend in the side, cutting him off as Will blanched at the mention of his name. He wasn't sure what to say and being put on the spot didn't help. Thankfully, Mike stepped in. "We weren't sure," He supplied, not completely outside the realm of truth. "So we checked the compasses,"

"And they still say this -" Lucas jerked a thumb back at the building behind them. "Is North,"

"Which it's not," Dustin added.

"So you're trying to find your friend," Hopper surmised, his expression still unreadable and the boys still quite unnerved.

"Uh, yes sir," Mike said nervously.

Hopper looked around. Despite the increasing sunlight, the woods were still quiet. Red and orange light was casting shadows across the sparkling snowy landscape and aside from the five of them, there was not a soul in sight.

"Follow me," Hopper ordered and he started to trudge through the snow along the perimeter of the fence. He looked back to see the boys hadn't moved an inch. "Let's go," He said more emphatically and the foursome reluctantly fell into step behind him.

"Taking a walk'?" Dustin muttered to Lucas. *"You said that last time!"*

"Shut up, Dustin!" Lucas replied, giving his friend a shove as they warily followed Chief Hopper around the perimeter of the fence.

"Cut it out back there!" Hopper ordered over his shoulder and the boys immediately quieted.

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Earlier That Morning

He couldn't fall asleep that night. His mind whirled as he pondered the potentials, recounting what he saw in the Upside Down over and over again. He needed to get back there and investigate. If there was some clue... some proof that Eleven was actually out there, he needed to find it and find her before anyone else in the lab did. And when would he have a better chance to explore the Upside Down without these government lackeys on his ass than New Years? The fact that it was a national holiday served him well. The building would be shut down for the day, everyone at home with their families for the long weekend.

Around 4 that morning, Hopper had stepped out into the snowy world the night had left behind after the storm. There was a hint of a sunrise approaching, its only giveaway being a red-orange glow on the horizon. Hopper drove to the lab in silence, his car radio off as the heat tried pitifully to warm up the old SUV. He could see his breath coming out in clouds even as he parked on one of the roads adjacent to the lab. He didn't want to actually park on the property - the more inconspicuous he could be, the better. He didn't need anyone seeing his vehicle in the lot and wondering what he was up to. That likely wouldn't be an issue - more than likely, everyone was at home and no one would even come to the lab today. Even for a bunch of stuffed shirts and science nerds, the people of Hawkins loved their holidays. That's what he was counting on, at least as he walked the rest of the distance to the lab, slipping out of his coat as he walked the deserted halls. It was eerily quiet in the building, other than

the way his boots squeaked against the linoleum, tracking melting snow as he passed through corridor after corridor. He stopped in the surveillance room and slipped out of his heavy winter coat, draping it over the chair as he surveyed the monitors. Everything around and in the lab appeared quiet and he settled into the chair, removing his hat and setting it down on the table in front of him. There was an ashtray toward the back of the monitors, tucked away mostly out of sight. Hopper pulled it closer, retrieving his cigarettes from the pocket of his coat, and decided to have a quick smoke break to help him plan his journey into the Upside Down.

As he reviewed the video footage from the night before, finding nothing of note, he contemplated what he would do if he found the girl today. Despite her "gifts", he wasn't optimistic about bringing her back safe and sound, though he did hope. Will Byers had spent a week in the Upside Down and they'd almost lost him. How could this girl pull through after a month? But hey, he hoped he was wrong. And even if he wasn't, he couldn't live with himself if he didn't try.

As he snuffed out his cigarette, exhaling a final cloud of smoke, something on one of the monitors caught his eye. Upon further inspection, he easily recognized four very familiar faces. The boys were hovering around some pipe, talking and looking over the fence. From his view he couldn't see them up close or in great detail but he knew their presence could easily screw up his plan. The last thing he needed was some kids busting into the lab, sending off alarms that would alert all the big wigs in town, and every other nosy neighbor, and before he'd know it, the lab would be swarming with employees and he'd have lost his shot. Hopper jumped out of his chair, grabbing his coat on the way as he headed back outside.

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Hopper demanded that the boys keep quiet until they got back to the surveillance room. He closed the door once all five of them were inside and finally let out a breath.

"Alright," He said, pinching the bridge of his nose as he leaned against the door. "On what planet did you kids think that sneaking into a federal facility - *this lab*, of all places - was a good idea?"

The four boys didn't answer. Dustin pursed his lips, looking around to his friends. Will stared quietly at the floor, looking a little sickly.

Lucas had his arms crossed, also looking at the floor. Mike absent-mindedly tapped his hand against his side as he stood quietly, eyes cast down.

Hopper scanned each of their faces before sighing. "Didn't you learn something last month?" He scolded. "Or do you like being chased down by government agents? Was that some *game* to you?"

"No, it's just -" Mike began but halted himself before sighing in frustration.

"We just wanted to find her," Dustin supplied gently.

"Yeah," Lucas nodded. "She's one of us,"

Mike looked up at that, smiling a little. After everything Lucas had said and everything they'd gone through regarding El's presence in their lives last month, it was still nice to hear him finally accept her - even if he'd accepted her as a part of their group a while ago.

"And what makes you think you're gonna find her here?" Hopper asked.

"Our compasses," Lucas replied.

"They're not pointing to true North," Dustin continued. "And that only happens when the electromagnetic field has been disrupted,"

"Like by a portal," Lucas added.

"They pointed us here," Mike said. "So, that's -"

"Basically proof that the portal is still open," Dustin finished. "Here," He gestured vaguely around them.

Hopper huffed, knowing they'd caught his lie about the portal closing. A better man would've complimented them on their detective work. Instead, he was only frustrated at the wrench in his own plans. As if he didn't have to be careful already, now he was stuck babysitting four boys.

"Okay, you got me," Hopper conceded gruffly. "The portal is open but

no one - I repeat - *no one* is supposed to know about it, you got that?" The boys nodded in unison. "I'm trying to find her, too," He admitted and the boys' eyebrows shot up. Whether or not that was a good thing, they couldn't be sure. "But the four of you traipsing around the property could have cost us all, do you understand that?" The boys nodded again.

At that moment, the echo of distant voices down the hall caught their attention and five sets of ears immediately perked up at the sound. Hopper put a finger to his lips and pointedly gestured to the boys, urging them to be quiet.

"*Stay here*," He whispered before slipping out of the room.

"Where'd he go?" Dustin asked quietly once they could no longer hear the voices.

Lucas peered out the window at the top of the door, just barely tall enough to reach. "Who cares, let's get outta here,"

"Lucas, wait," Mike said, his attention drawn to a set of video tapes sitting on the table. He gingerly picked one up labeled "011-32".

"What?" Lucas turned around all three boys hovered around Mike, eyeing the tapes.

"11," Dustin said. "I bet that's..."

Before anyone could stop him, Mike had inserted the tape into a VCR and the image on one of the monitors flickered to an overhead shot of a small room. The boys could easily see Eleven seated at a table, clad in only a hospital gown. A man they didn't recognize was behind her, dressed in white and holding some metal contraption with a bunch of wires and fashioned like a helmet in his hands. He reached over to put the device on her head but she dodged him, scooting the chair away in the process. The man growled in frustration before grabbing El roughly by the shoulder and forcing her back into a still, sitting position. Mike tensed as he watched and he wasn't sure if he was more angry or upset at what he was seeing. On the video, El turned around, glaring heatedly at the man before he yelped at the mirror in front of them, "*Need a little help in here!*"

"What are they doing?" Will murmured but no one responded. Instead they watched, their eyes fixed on the screen.

The white-haired man that El had referred to as 'Papa' entered the room in the video and Mike immediately felt his blood boiling. As much as he had hated Troy for bullying and terrorizing him and his friends for the past few years, no one had made Mike feel the way El's Papa did. Just the sight of him sent an adrenaline rush through Mike that primed him to fight and caused him to see red. He wasn't even listening to what was being said at this point. He saw the way El sat frozen, her eyes wide with what appeared to be fear. She never spoke much but seeing her in that environment, hooked up to machines like a lab rat, was infuriating. How could they do that to her?

The boys were stirred from their video viewing by the increasing sound of voices coming down the hallway.

"Shit, they're coming back!" Dustin said, quickly reaching over Mike to turn the video off.

"Quick, get down!" Mike said as the four scrambled to position themselves out of sight, as low to the ground as they could get. They listened intently, noting how the voices seemed to stop getting louder.

"Can you hear anything?" Will whispered to Lucas and Dustin who were crouched closest to the door.

Lucas put his ear up to the door. "Barely,"

"Tell us what they say," Mike requested and both Dustin and Lucas hovered by the door, listening for bits and pieces of the conversation outside.

"- didn't expect to see you until Monday," Someone said.

"Yeah, well," Hopper's gruff voice sounded nonchalant. "Paperwork's a bitch, ya know?"

"Indeed, it is," Another voice sounded suspicious but calm. "Well, I hope you finish soon. We need you well-rested for our next field run,"

"I'll be fine," Hopper replied casually.

"I would hope so," The first voice again. "We need to find that girl,"

Lucas and Dustin's eyes bulged at that.

"What?" Mike whispered. "What is it?"

Both Dustin and Lucas waved at him to be quiet, leaning against the door to keep listening.

"I'll do the best I can," Hopper replied.

"As long as 'the best you can' means fulfilling the commitment you made to this facility, I should expect that everything will work out," The voice outside said.

"*Oh shit*," Dustin peeled himself away from the door, sitting down on the floor and holding his head in his hands. "*Ohhhh shit, oh shit, oh shit...*"

"What's wrong, you guys?" Will asked quietly.

Lucas looked at Dustin who was at a loss for words. "Dustin was right," He said. "Hopper pulled a Lando!"

"*What?!*" Mike exclaimed, struggling to keep his voice down and earning a shush from Lucas who put his ear to the door once again. It was quiet outside and he cautiously stood up, peeping his head over the edge of the window and looking out into the hall. It was empty again.

"We've gotta get outta here before they come back!" Lucas declared.

.....

"Every move you make and every vow you break, every smile you fake, every claim you stake, I'll be watching you..."

9. The Promise

[A/N: AHHHH it's finals season! But hey, I managed to crank out another chapter despite all the exams and papers and projects so that's a plus, right?

As always, your feedback is uber appreciated and helps me to improve as a writer so thank you!

Enjoy!]

Chapter 9: The Promise (by When In Rome)

"If you need a friend, don't look to a stranger. You know in the end, I'll always be there..."

.....

"What do we do?" Will asked, his eyes wide with panic. "What if they come in here?"

Mike looked up to the monitors above his head. "Look, there they are!" He pointed to one of the screens and the boys could see two men walking down the hallway with Hopper. One was wearing what appeared to be a suit and the other had a long white lab coat.

"It looks like they're getting farther away from us," Dustin commented.

"If we're gonna go, we need to go now, guys," Lucas insisted.

"Okay, hold on!" Mike snapped, trying to process. "Just hold on a second!" They needed a plan. They definitely didn't know their way around this building and the last thing they needed was to accidentally run into someone. He studied the monitors one by one, trying to get a sense of the space and how they could best avoid running into anyone who worked at the lab, including Hopper. There were so many cameras throughout the facility that it was like putting a puzzle together. The pieces were out of order but everything they needed was right in front of them.

"Hey look," Dustin observed. "I bet that's how Hopper knew we were outside," He pointed to a monitor that showed a view of the area outside the fence where they'd been earlier when they were trying to figure out their entrypoint.

Will sat patiently on the floor as his friends debated the best course of action to take. His stomach turned with a familiar rumbling but he tried to focus on suppressing it.

"Okay, here!" Mike pointed to one of the monitors. The camera was focused on a seemingly large room. There was a water tank and a dark, pixelated area in the background that looked suspicious. "I think this is the portal,"

"Let me see," Lucas said, squeezing himself in beside Mike to get a better look despite the low video quality. "Eleven said before the portal was next to a big water tank, right?"

"I think so," Mike nodded.

"Alright, let's do it," Lucas said, his brow set in determination.

"Dustin," Mike said. "The hall's still clear, right?"

Dustin peered through the window. "All good here,"

"Okay, let's go now before anyone comes back," Mike said, turning away from the wall of monitors and noticing Will on the floor. He was holding his legs close to his body and staring at the floor. "Will... are you okay?" He asked cautiously.

Will opened his mouth to respond but before he could make a sound he involuntarily lurched forward, retching. Mike and Lucas jumped back out of range as one of the slug-like creatures Will had been puking up lately came sliding out of his mouth. This one, however, was larger and longer than the others had been and Will choked for a second as the slug slid out of his mouth and fell to the floor with a smack.

"Aw hell no!" Lucas exclaimed, stepping forward and squishing a section of the slug's body with his snow boot. The creature squealed, convulsing for a minute before finally becoming still.

"Yeah, that's never gonna *not* be gross," Dustin said plainly, pursing his lips.

"Okay," Mike said, trying to shake off his sympathy nausea and focus on the mission at hand. "We need to get outta here," He crouched down to Will who was trying to catch his breath. "Are you okay? Can you get up?"

Panting, Will looked up to meet Mike's gaze. "It's about to happen," He said, his voice raspy and breathless.

"What's about to happen?" Dustin inquired and before he could finish the question completely, Will had vanished.

"*That*," Lucas gestured to where their friend had once sat. "What do we do *now*?"

"We know where he is, right?" Mike quickly reasoned. "If we can get to the portal, and get into the Upside Down, we'll probably see him when we're there,"

"Okay," Lucas pressed. "But what if he comes back to *this* spot and we're gone?"

Movement on one of the monitors caught Dustin's eye. "We can't wait," He said, his voice thick with anxiety. "Hopper's coming back,"

The boys turned to the monitor to see the police chief headed back down the hallways that would eventually lead to their location.

"He said he comes back to our dimension in whatever place he walked to in the Upside Down, right?" Mike said quickly. "Maybe he'll walk around in the Upside Down and when he comes back, it won't be this room. It'll be somewhere else,"

"That *may or may not* be a good thing," Lucas said. "He could randomly appear in front of some guards or something,"

"Guys," Dustin said, anxiously peering through the door's window for the third time. "We've gotta go! *Now*,"

"Okay, come on!" Mike said and Dustin opened the door, quickly

checking the hall before the three boys scrambled out of the room and ran off in search of the portal.

.....

Everything seemed to look the same as the boys darted down wood-paneled hallway after wood-paneled hallway, pausing at the edge of each corridor to check that the coast was clear. They had a vague idea of where they were going but it wasn't until they stumbled upon a hallway with a clear plastic curtain and two hazmat symbols that they thought they were on the right track.

Mike, Lucas, and Dustin exchanged looks and Dustin nodded encouragingly to the zipper that ran down the middle.

Mike exhaled, unzipped the curtain, and one by one the trio stepped through. This hallway had walls made of white concrete blocks and had the same white ceiling and linoleum flooring as the other hallways but there was a more sterile and cold feel to this part of the lab.

"This is kinda creepy," Lucas said, looking around the narrow corridor.

At the end of the hallway was a wood-paneled set of double doors.

"Damnit," Dustin groaned. "It's a dead-end," He gestured to the swipe-access card reader attached to the wall.

"Now what?" Lucas grumbled, frustrated.

Mike tugged on the door handles, just in case, but sighed in exasperation when they didn't budge. He leaned back against the wall, the three of them hidden in the small space between the main hallway and the doorway.

"This should be it, right?" Mike wondered. "Did you guys see any other places on the monitors we could get in?"

"Nope," Dustin shook his head.

Lucas shrugged. "Not really,"

"What the hell do you kids think you're doing?!" Hopper's voice, low and terse, echoed down the hall and the boys froze in place. Without a way to get through the swipe-entry double doors beside them, they were trapped.

"How did he know we were here?" Lucas whispered, flattening his back against the wall.

"Did he follow us?" Mike asked under his breath.

Dustin dramatically gestured for the two to zip it but despite being hidden by the wall at the end of the corridor, it was obvious Hopper knew they were there when they heard his heavy footsteps coming down the hall.

What do we do? Dustin mouthed just as Hopper appeared before them.

"Are you trying to get yourselves killed?!" Hopper said through gritted teeth, his voice low and harsh.

The boys looked at him with distrust, their faces fixed in scowls. Their bodies betrayed their bravado, however, in that the three of them huddled as close to the corner as they could, away from Hopper who noticed their glares *and* their fear.

"We're not gonna let you give El back to the lab!" Mike said defiantly.

"That's right!" Lucas backed him up.

"We heard you talking to those government guys," Dustin added.

Hopper's eyebrows shot up as he realized what was going on. *Shit...* He thought to himself as he huffed, stepping away from the boys, their faces morphing from forced bravery to confusion.

It was dangerous enough having the boys in here, let alone get into details regarding his plans to betray the lab, but knowing these kids, it was obvious that the only thing he could do to keep the situation running smoothly was to oblige them. "What all did you boys hear?" Hopper asked, crossing his arms and looking over each of them.

"Enough," Lucas replied snarkily.

"We know you're working with the lab now," Dustin supplied. "And we know you made some deal with them about getting El back,"

"We're not gonna let you take her!" Mike said, his confusion fading as his anger returned.

"Is that right?" Hopper said sarcastically, smirking down at them.

"You're damn right!" Lucas shot back.

Hopper pursed his lips, half amused by their misunderstanding of his intentions and half irritated at having to explain himself to a trio of middle-schoolers. "Alright, here's the deal," He said gruffly, looking around and pausing before walking over to a corner where a small camera was hidden in the crook between the walls and the ceiling. Without so much as a second thought, he slammed the side of his fist into the camera, destroying it. The boys watched in shock as bits and pieces of plastic and glass fell to the floor. "I'm not trying to find El for *them* but it's better for them to *think* that I am. That raises less suspicion, understand?" He said, rubbing his hand and ignoring the boys' stunned expressions as they darted glances between Hopper and the remains of the video camera.

Shaking off his bewilderment, Mike ventured, "Why should we believe you?"

"Frankly, I don't care if you do or you don't," Hopper said, crouching down and meeting the boys at eye-level. "But if you want the truth, you're gonna have to do as I say. No more running off like wild cowboys or sneaking into places you have no business sneaking into, got it?"

He was met with nothing but suspicious glares.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Hopper sighed as he crouched lower, resting his elbows against his knees and hanging his head for a moment in thought. "Okay, listen," He began. "I'm gonna go back into the Upside Down and I'm gonna look for her *and I'm gonna bring her back*. Not for *the lab*,"

"Then why are you doing it?" Lucas asked.

"Yeah," Dustin chimed in. "If you're not actually bringing El back for the government guys, then what's in it for you?"

Hopper looked at them like they were asking the most stupid question he'd ever heard. "Are you kidding?"

"No," Mike said, crossing his arms. "How are we supposed to trust you?"

At this point, Hopper was getting frustrated. Every moment they debated in this little corner of the hallway was another minute of wasted time and another minute that one of his supervisors or one of the researchers could decide to come back. He'd already run into an agent who'd come in to pick up his briefcase to work over the holiday weekend and a researcher who'd just finished spending the entire night setting up test samples of the foliage they'd found in the Upside Down. For all he knew, they could run into another stray lab employee at any point and then what? There was only so much damage control he could do and it wasn't like the lab fully trusted him. He was indebted to them and they were confident in their ability to make him disappear should he double-cross them. Hopper was just *more* confident in his own ability to do so without getting caught. That confidence, however, minimized with every minute he spent arguing with these kids about his intentions.

Finally fed up, Hopper growled, "Because I'm the one who went down into the - the Upside Down, along with Joyce, and saved your friend, who-" He stopped, finally realizing there were only three boys standing in front of him instead of four. "Wait a minute, where's Will?"

"He-" Lucas began but Dustin elbowed him.

"Don't tell him!"

"*Where the hell is Will?!*" Hopper demanded and the boys jumped at his sudden, aggressive tone.

"H-He's in the Upside Down," Mike confessed.

Hopper stood up, reeling. "Are you f-" He caught himself. "Are you kidding me? Again?"

Dustin shook his head. "It's been happening ever since he came back,"

"He just goes in and out sometimes," Lucas added. "Sometimes it's a few seconds, sometimes longer,"

"But he always comes back," Mike said. "He just can't control how or when it happens,"

"Great," Hopper muttered, shaking his head. "Alright, here's what's gonna happen - *because we don't have a lot of time*. You three are going to stay with me and do everything I tell you to do," He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, retrieving a small card from one of the slots and swiping it through the card machine on the wall. A small green light lit up on the card reader and the double doors made a *click* sound. Hopper reached past the boys and yanked one of the doors open.

"Where are you taking us?" Mike inquired, following his actions with a wary intrigue.

"The Upside Down," Hopper said brusquely, then gestured for them to go through the door. "Now, come on,"

The boys hesitated and Hopper growled in frustration. "Let's go!"

"What if it's a trap?" Dustin said to Lucas and Mike.

"God dammit!" Hopper said, his patience having finally run its course. "You wanna know why I made that deal with the lab? Because it was the only way I could save your friend,"

Mike's brow furrowed as he began to put the pieces together. "Hold on, *hold on!*" His eyes widened in shock and then flashed with anger as realization dawned on him. "You're the reason the bad men knew we were at the school!" Lucas and Dustin's jaws dropped. "You told those government guys where we were! It's *your fault* El's in that place in the first place!" He was almost screaming at this point. Hot, angry tears pricked at the corners of his eyes as his face held a deep scowl.

Hopper huffed in resignation, then put a fist to his mouth as he prepared to speak. "You're right," he admitted. "And I've felt like *shit* about it ever since but ya know what? That was the only way I was gonna get Will out of the Upside Down alive. Hell, that was the only way *any* of us were getting out of there alive because believe me, they were ready to kill *me, Joyce, Will*," Hopper counted each person off on his fingers. "- and they *still* would've found Eleven because they've got this whole damn town bugged. The only reason *you three* weren't killed on sight was because *that* was part of the deal, too, so when any of you are ready to make a decision like that about who lives and who might die, you let me know. Until then, *shut up* and follow me because we're going to find Eleven and *bring her home*," He finished and by that point, the boys' indignant and furious scowls had morphed into uncomfortable shock and regret. "Now, *come on*," He gestured through the door once again, more vehemently this time, and the boys quickly scurried past him and down another hallway, though this one was dimly lit with only the emergency lights activated.

Hopper flipped a switch on the side of the wall, illuminating the hallway. The white concrete walls and white floors and ceilings continued down this way, making everything feel cold and hospital-like. Several doors were open as the four made their way down hall after hall, the boys warily following behind as Hopper led the way.

One of the rooms they passed had a small bed and something atop the blanket caught Mike's eye. He paused in the doorway of the darkened room, the light from the hall casting sparse light into the room but enough that he could make out a crudely drawn picture on the wall and a video camera in the high corner of the ceiling. A plush tiger sat on the bed along with a thin blanket and single pillow. The sight of the room made Mike's stomach flip.

This was her room. He thought, and he could imagine guards grabbing her, hurting her, forcing her to use her powers to do who knows what. He never really learned what exactly the government wanted her for but did it matter? He spent a week with her and knew they put her through something awful. Seeing where she lived... where she must have grown up... made him want to throw up and hit something at the same time.

"Mike, come on," Dustin called, a few feet ahead. Lucas was a few paces ahead of him and looked back but Hopper hadn't noticed the delay yet.

Mike glanced back at El's room once more before jogging to catch up.

Never again. Another promise.

.

"But when you're in doubt, and when you're in danger, take a look all around and I'll be there..."

10. Hello

[A/N: Holy adrenaline, Batman! Okay, so I don't know what happened but I just knocked this chapter out and it's long and intense and I have no words other than I hope you like it lol]

Chapter 10: Hello (by Lionel Richie)

"I've been alone with you inside my mind and in my dreams, I've kissed your lips a thousand times. I sometimes see you pass outside my door..."

.....

He'd never stayed this long before. It'd already been several minutes and he was still in this cold, damp wasteland. As creepy as the lab was in the real world, it was even more unnerving in the Upside Down. After vomiting another, larger, slug, and realizing that he wasn't going to slip back out of the Upside Down right away, Will began to walk around in search of the portal. As he passed through hallways covered in vines, he could almost hear the voices of his friends like faint echoes in his mind.

He explored the halls with a different kind of trepidation than he would have in the real world. While they were fearful of being discovered by government agents in the real lab, in the Upside Down version, Will was inclined to keep an eye out for monsters. The Demogorgon may have been dead, and he might not have seen any other monsters when he spent the week here, but that didn't mean it was impossible.

This is really weird; I've never stayed in the Upside Down this long... except the first time. Will thought to himself as he stepped through throngs of vines along the floor. *Maybe if I find the portal, I can go back home that way.*

When he stumbled upon the clear plastic hazmat curtain, dripping with brown sludge, his curiosity piqued. A portal to another dimension would probably be behind a hazmat curtain, right? Will grimaced at the sensation of the sticky, slimey goo between his fingers as he gripped the curtain's zipper, opening it and climbing

through and into another hallway. Everything was dark and he could barely see where he was going. A few paces down the hallway he came to a set of double doors. He shook and pulled on the handles to no avail. The doors were locked and he was at a dead end.

Pushing aside his anxiety at the thought that he had not flickered back home yet, as well as the residual nausea, Will huddled in the doorway in front of the double doors, sitting on a large vine that snaked itself along the wall and resting his feet against another. White particles floated through the air like snowflakes and images of the snowfall from last night fluttering through his mind. What he wouldn't give to be back home, to not have to worry about slipping in and out of the Upside Down at random, to not be puking up slugs all the time... How long would he have to deal with these side effects? Or was this his new life? Would it ever go away?

As he pined for simpler times, he realized something. He could slip back into the *real* lab at any moment and he had no idea who was around. The lab obviously wasn't empty, considering Hopper had been out in the hall talking to at least two other people. What if he reappeared in front of the wrong person? Not only would that be dangerous considering he was trespassing on government property but kids don't just randomly appear out of the blue. They'd know something was up, maybe recognize him as the kid who disappeared into the Upside Down back in November and then what? Conduct experiments on him like they'd done with Eleven?

Will began to hyperventilate at the thought and he scrambled to standing before running as fast as he could through the dark halls, trying to retrace the steps he and his friends had taken with Hopper on their way in.

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Video 011-27

A young Eleven was lying face down on her bed, the covers neatly made beneath her. She clutched a small stuffed tiger to her side and stared blankly at the wall beside her. Her head was freshly shaved and her feet bare, a hospital gown being the only garment she wore. The room was small and mostly empty with only the bed and a hand-drawn picture

taped to one of the concrete blocks that comprised the walls of the room.

The door opened suddenly and Eleven jumped, quickly pulling herself into a sitting position and clutching her knees to her chest. She visibly relaxed, but only slightly, when Papa entered the room.

"Good afternoon, Eleven," He greeted her warmly but her gaze followed the large book in his hands. "I've brought something for you,"

She watched with interest as he sat on the edge of the bed, tilting the book so she could see. It had vivid colors and illustrations of a variety of characters she didn't recognize. Some wearing long, beautiful gowns, others with dramatically angry facial expressions, and still others were animals like geese and owls and other birds. She tentatively scooted a little closer to get a better look.

"This is a nursery rhymes book," Papa explained. "Do you know what that is?"

Eleven shook her head, wide eyes watching and waiting for him to tell her.

"It's a book of short stories that rhyme," Papa said, opening the front cover and flipping through to the table of contents. "The endings of the words sound similar,"

Eleven only blinked in response, then pointed to the book. "Story?"

Papa nodded, "Yes, would you like me to read one to you?"

Eleven nodded eagerly, her eyes sparkling were the only change in her facial expression.

"Alright, then," Papa said, scanning the table of contents and then flipping through several pages to a brightly colored image of a tall grandfather clock. Eleven had never seen anything like it but the colors and the details fascinated her. She recognized the small creature at the base of the clock as a mouse like one of the ones she'd been asked to kill last week.

"No!" She screamed, pointing at the mouse and scuttling to the far end the bed, pulling herself into a ball and peering over at the book in terror. Tears flooded her eyes in seconds and her shoulders shook violently.

"No, no, Eleven," Papa said evenly, reassuringly. He patted the spot in which she'd just been seated. "Come back, it's okay,"

Though she stopped shaking, Eleven warily shook her head, her bottom lip trembling.

"It's just a story," Papa said. "It isn't real and you don't have to hurt anything. Just listen,"

"Listen?" She asked softly.

"Yes, Eleven," He nodded, patting the spot on the bed once more. "Come listen,"

Eleven gingerly crawled across the bed and sat down, though a little further from the book than she'd once been.

"Alright now," Papa began to read. "Hickory dickory, dock. The mouse ran up the clock. The clock struck one, the mouse ran down, hickory dickory dock,"

Eleven stared at the book, at the mouse running up the grandfather clock and another image on the next page of the same mouse running back down to the floor. A hint of a smile touched the corner of her lips.

"Did you like that?" Papa asked, smiling and watching her reaction.

Eleven moved a little closer and tucked her legs under her, resting her hands on her knees as she looked at him and nodded.

"Good," Papa nodded affirmatively and flipped through the pages some more. "Let's do another, shall we?"

Eleven nodded in earnest, looking over his shoulder as he perused the many pages of the book.

He finally stopped on a page with a boy and a girl climbing a large grassy hill. "Ah, this is a good one," Papa commented, then paused. "I have an idea, Eleven," He was met with only a blank, expectant stare. "I'm going to go out into the hall and read this rhyme and when I come back, I want you to tell me what it was about," Her face fell slightly with disappointment and he raised his eyebrows expectantly. "Can you do that

for me?"

Pursing her lips, Eleven gave a small nod.

"Excellent," Papa smiled in satisfaction and stood up, stepping outside the room and closing the door behind him.

The room was silent for a few moments before Eleven began to speak, her eyes clenched tightly shut as she focused.

"Jack..." Her words were barely a whisper, barely audible. "And Jill... went up the hill," She paused. "To... fetch a pail... of water," Another pause. "Jack... fell down and... broke his crown," She repeated the words without any particular inflection, as if they felt foreign on her lips. "And Jill... came tumbling... after,"

.

Hopper led the boys into a room lined with dozens of mustard yellow hazmat suits of varying sizes and lengths. They hung on hangers that lined each of the walls, clustered together to make room for as many as possible.

"Find something that fits and put it on," Hopper instructed and the three of them looked through suit after suit, sizing each one up against themselves. Hopper already knew where to find his suit and he quickly picked through a nearby section of big and tall options.

"These are all huge," Lucas commented as they went section by section with little luck.

"Try those over there," Hopper pointed them to the adjacent wall where the shorter suits hung. "And make it fast,"

Mike, Dustin, and Lucas managed to find a few options that, while not the best fit, would manage. With their heights and sizes, they were able to make some of the women's suits fit.

Once everyone had climbed into their suits and Hopper had helped them to secure all of the pieces, the foursome trudged down the hall to the elevator that would take them underground.

All the while, thoughts raced through Mike's head. Was El still okay? What would it be like when they found her? Would they be able to make it out of the lab without anyone finding out? And what about Hopper? Everything he'd said upstairs had thrown all of them for a loop. To think about having to choose between Will and El... Mike couldn't do it. Or rather, his hesitation made him uncomfortable and he tried not to think about it. While he still questioned Hopper and was uncertain as to how much they could trust him, he was really their only chance at finding El. Despite his anger at the role Hopper had played in the government guys finding them at the school and the fact that if Hopper *hadn't* sold out their location, El wouldn't have drained her energy killing all those agents and the monster *wouldn't* have been attracted to all that blood and El *wouldn't* have put herself in danger in order to stop the Demogorgon and thereby trap herself in the Upside Down *and* they maybe could've gone to the Snowball. But at the same time, if Hopper hadn't made that decision, would Will still be here? Would he still even be *alive*? And honestly, Hopper had a point. They didn't know where they were going and it was a huge risk to be running around the lab, not knowing where they were going or if someone could pop out unexpectedly and catch them. And then there was the Upside Down, what would that be like? If they were in hazmat suits it had to be dangerous, and especially considering Will's condition when he returned... and his condition now... it was kind of scary. Still, there were more important things. They had to find El and they had to bring her home. There was no alternative; that's just what had to happen.

When they reached the bottom floor and the elevator doors opened, the first thing they noticed were white particles floating through the air. Mike recognized them from his dreams and felt an odd sense of reassurance that perhaps his dreams *had* been real. He'd actually communicated with El in the Upside Down and it wasn't just in his head. Thick patches of vines covered some parts of the walls and brown puddles of slime were scattered around the floor. Hopper led the group silently down dark hallways and through a door that led to a large room. A thick fog was settled over everything and it was hard to see, especially through the glass visors of the hazmat helmets. There was, what appeared to be, a control room situated high above and protected by walls and glass. Mike looked to the side of the room where a tall water tank was stationed and he assumed that was the

one El had been talking about when she told them about this room last month. He wondered if *that* had been the "bath" they'd put her in when she used her powers to find people.

The most prominent part of the room, however, was the large, plant-like opening in one of the walls near the tank. Covered in vines and sticky brown slime, it seemed to pulsate with pink as if it were alive and breathing.

"Whoa," Lucas's voice sounded electronic through the voice adapter in his helmet.

"Holy shit," Dustin breathed.

"Are you boys ready?" Hopper asked, turning back to the boys who had paused to stare in wonder at the huge, monstrous hole in the wall.

"Y-Yeah, we're ready," Mike forced his voice and cautiously followed Hopper up to the edge of the portal.

"Now when we get through there, you kids stick close," Hopper instructed. "Don't go running off, don't fall behind, and don't draw attention to yourself. We still don't know if there's anything else out there so no screwing around, got it?"

Mike, Lucas, and Dustin all nodded obediently and Hopper pushed aside some of the slimy vines covering the entrance to the portal. Dustin made a face at the slick sound of the vines tearing and snapping before all four of them stepped through.

While Mike had some familiarity with the Upside Down from his dreams, the rotting vines and unknown brown sludge that covered everything were new to Lucas and Dustin. As the four of them walked through the Upside Down version of the lab and made their way outside, the two boys silently pointed and made faces at different piles of decaying foliage, each more disgusting than the next.

"You boys doing alright?" Hopper was the first to speak since they ventured into the Upside Down. He led them around the fence as they made their way to the woods.

"Yeah," Mike spoke for the three of them. "We're fine,"

"Good," Hopper said distantly. "Now when I was out here before, I saw something out there in the woods," He gestured to the expanse of trees just a short distance in front of them.

"What was it?" Dustin asked.

"I don't know," Hopper replied. "That's why we're gonna find out,"

As they trekked through the mucky landscape, the boys noticed several egg-shaped pods throughout the woods.

"What are those things?" Mike inquired.

"We're not sure yet," Hopper replied. "They're running tests at the lab but-" He stopped when he noticed Dustin already poking one of the luminous yellow pods. "Don't *touch* them," He sighed, shaking his head.

"Gross," Lucas commented as they passed a pod that had seemingly exploded, yellow-green slime oozing out and across the grass. "This one's busted,"

"There's a few like that," Mike said. "I saw a couple back on the other side of the fence,"

"There it is," Hopper said, not having been paying attention to their conversation. He squinted his eyes as they drew nearer to the mysterious dark lump on the ground. "That's my shirt," He noted, confused for a moment.

"That's the shirt El was wearing when she got sucked into the Upside Down!" Mike exclaimed. "Maybe she's nearby!"

"Alright, hold your horses," Hopper said, putting a hand on Mike's shoulder to minimize the boy's rising excitement and volume. "Let's keep looking around. If this is here, then she's probably not too far out,"

"Didn't Will say he saw her in your basement, Mike?" Dustin asked.

"Oh yeah," Mike said thoughtfully. "That's kind of far to walk in a place like this, isn't it?"

"Hmm..." Hopper pondered. "You would think, wouldn't ya?"

"Chief, do you know anything about um," Mike ventured the question. "There's this like, box out in the woods-"

"With food in it," Lucas added.

"Close to Mirkwood?" Hopper turned to them, raising an eyebrow. Once again, they'd figured him out.

"Yeah, that's it!" Mike said excitedly. "Did you...?"

"He totally did!" Dustin exclaimed.

"How long have you been putting food out there?"

"Have you seen El?"

"How did you know she was out there?"

"Alright, enough!" Hopper halted their line of questioning. "Yes, I've been putting food out because I knew she was in the Upside Down, *no* I haven't seen her, and *yes*, the three of you need to keep your voices *down*,"

Just as Mike was about to speak, the faint sound of a twig snapping caught Hopper's attention. "Hold on," He put his hand up in Mike's face, effectively silencing him. "Anyone else hear that?"

The three boys looked at each other, shaking their heads.

Hopper crept in the direction of the sound, peering around trees as best he could. "Eleven?" He called out into the darkness and the boys, picking up his cue, began to call out as well.

"El!"

"El, are you there?"

"El, where are you?"

"Shh, hold on," Hopper shushed them once again as they approached an old, overturned tree. It was rotting from the inside out and vines had wrapped themselves tightly around it. His instincts guiding him, Hopper cautiously approached the log and, peering over it, immediately recognized the form of the young girl they were looking for. "We found her!"

The boys hurried to get close and upon catching sight of her, Mike flung himself over the tree's edge, scrambling to El's side.

"El!" He exclaimed, shaking her shoulder. She was still wearing Nancy's old dress and she'd lost her shoes. The striped knee high socks they'd given her were stained and dark with dirt and brown goo, with holes growing in the heels and at the toes. The once pink dress was now a dingy shade of brown and her soaking wet hair was about an inch longer than it had been when they'd first met her. The length made her hair easier to tousle and some tufts stuck up in random directions while others were slicked against her forehead. Despite Mike's attempts, she didn't rouse. Mike turned back to his friends and Hopper. "She's not responding! *Why isn't she saying anything?!*" He shrieked desperately.

Hopper effortlessly jumped over the tree as Dustin and Lucas followed after.

"Alright, come on, El!" Hopper said, his voice firm and loud as he shook El by the shoulder. He placed two fingers against her neck, paused for a moment, then put an ear to her face. "She's alive, but barely," He quickly scooped her up into his arms. "C'mon, let's go,"

The race back to the portal was quick but cumbersome as the four of them struggled against their bulky hazmat suits.

"When we get inside," Hopper said as they awkwardly jogged back to the lab. "We've gotta make this fast. She needs to get to a hospital A.S.A.P. There's a laundry chute in the room with the suits - we get in, dump the suits, we get out. Got it?"

The boys all uttered their understanding, consumed more so with worry about El. Mike watched her more than he watched where he was going, the sight of her dangling in Hopper's arms, her head lolled

back, was gut-wrenching. What if they were too late?

Once they were back inside, they made a mad dash for the suits room, all the while praying that they were alone in the building. If ever there was a time to not get caught, this would be it.

Hopper gently laid El down on the linoleum floor so he could remove his suit. As the four of them climbed out of their suits, unbuttoning buttons, unlocking helmets, unraveling tape from around their gloved arms, and unzipping zippers, El stirred slightly.

A small whimper was all it took for Mike to kick off his suit and toss the helmet onto the pile before he was knelt down at El's side. "El, can you hear me?" He reached for her hand and held it close.

Her eyes fluttered partially open and her eyebrows clenched uncomfortably. "Mike?"

"Yeah, El!" Mike beamed with relief, almost shaking with excitement. "I'm here! I'm here!"

An unnerving sigh escaped her lips and her head lolled back and to the side once again.

"El!" Mike cried. "El! Wake up, come on!"

Hopper, having removed all parts of his suit and tossed them down the chute, hurried over as Dustin and Lucas finished putting their suits away, including Mike's. He scooped her back up into his arms. "Okay, let's get outta here," His voice was taut and authoritative and the boys obediently followed after him as they ran through the halls of the lab, finally making their way outside after an agonizing run through swipe-access doors and zippered hazmat curtains.

"My truck's down the street," Hopper said, El's limp limbs flinging about as he ran. Through the lab's parking lot, through the trees, down Mirkwood they ran until they got to a cross-section of the road and Hopper's truck was tucked inconspicuously to the side of the infrequently used road.

Balancing El against one arm and the truck, he unlocked the front door and Dustin slipped in past him to unlock the others before

clambering across the center console and into the front passenger seat.

Mike and Lucas climbed into the backseat and Hopper laid El across them, her head on Mike's leg and her feet stretched across Lucas' lap. "Keep her steady, don't let her fall," Hopper ordered before throwing the back door closed and hopping into the driver's seat.

"Come on, El," Mike grabbed her hand again and leaned close to her face, hoping that hearing him better might help. "You're gonna be okay," He bit the inside of his lip to try and keep it from quivering. Lucas kept his eyes averted, pretending to not notice the way his best friend's eyes were tearing up. "Just *hold on*, El," Mike whispered and though he was trying to keep his voice steady, it sounded as though he could break at any moment. As he held El's hand, he slipped his grip down to her wrist, feeling for her pulse. Panic set in as he realized he couldn't feel anything.

"I can't feel her pulse!" Mike screamed, his voice hoarse.

"Wait, what?!" Dustin exclaimed, turning around in his seat as Hopper raced to the hospital.

"I can't find it!" Mike awkwardly finagled his fingers against her wrist, trying to find *something* before giving up and touching her neck with two fingers, just as Hopper had done in the Upside Down.

"Is she still breathing?" Hopper looked back in the rear-view mirror. "Check if she's breathing!"

"I don't know!" Mike cried helplessly and Lucas leaned across the seat, putting the back of his hand against her nose. "Well?!" Mike looked to his friend.

Lucas shrugged, "I don't know, I didn't feel anything!"

"Alright, I'm stopping the car," Hopper said, pulling over into another patch of woods and quickly throwing the car into park before jumping out and yanking the back door open. He reached across Lucas to feel El's neck for a pulse. "Get her outta there," He demanded, reaching to pick her up again.

"Is she gonna be okay?" Mike asked as Hopper pulled El out. "Is she breathing?!"

Ignoring the young boy, Hopper gently laid El down in the snowy grass beside the car. Dustin and Lucas stood behind Mike as they watched Hopper check for vital signs from El. Mike did his best to force himself to keep calm but his adrenaline was through the roof and he couldn't stop shaking. His hands trembled and he tapped his fingers against his sides nervously. He bounced in worried anticipation and there was no holding back his tears at this point. "Come on, *do* something!" He cried.

"Mike..." Dustin put a comforting hand on Mike's shoulder but his bouncing quickly, though unconsciously, shook it off.

"Alright, somebody get over here and help me," Hopper said and Mike was on the ground beside them before he could even finish the statement. "You know CPR, kid?"

Mike shook his head, rubbing his face with the back of his hand to wipe away the tears.

"You're about to learn," Hopper said and he perched on his knees next to El's side. "Get up there by her head,"

Mike scurried into position as Hopper continued to give directives. "Tilt her head back, lift her chin, and when I tell you," He said, cupping his hands over El's chest and giving quick, evenly paced chest compressions. "I want you to pinch her nose and breathe into her mouth, twice," The whole experience felt like de ja vu to Hopper as only a month prior had he been giving the same instructions to Joyce Byers as they struggled to resuscitate Will. "One second, then pause, then breathe again,"

Mike nodded in rapid succession. "Okay, I can do it!"

"Okay, *now*!" Hopper said, lifting his weight off of El's body.

Mike pinched El's nostrils shut and her lips parted just enough. He touched his lips to hers, exhaling as hard as he could into her mouth. The whole thing would have been much more awkward had he not

been completely terrified. After a pause, he did the same thing and Hopper repeated the chest compressions, throwing his upper body weight into the action. He paused at one point, checking El's pulse once again but still nothing. Mike felt like a wave was crashing down on him as he watched Hopper resume the compressions yet again and more tears spilled from his eyes, dripping down onto El's forehead. He wiped them away just in time for Hopper to yell.

"Again!"

Mike repeated the breaths and with each exhale, it was like he was willing life into her as though the wish alone could bring her back. He silently pleaded in his head for her to be alright but with every second that passed, he became more and more distraught.

Hopper placed his fingers against El's pulse once more. "We got somethin'," He said, scooping her back up. "Back in the car, *back in the car!*" He ordered and the boys quickly scrambled back into the vehicle.

This time, as Hopper settled El back into the seat with Lucas and Mike, she stirred slightly, though her eyes never opened. Mike watched her, relieved to see the shallow rise and fall of her chest before flushing with embarrassment for looking at her there.

"We'll be at the hospital soon, El," He leaned down, putting on the best reassuring tone he could manage now that he thought she might be able to hear. "Just keep holding on. You can do this!" He said, fighting the tremble in his voice and hoping against hope that he was right.

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"Hello? Is it me you're looking for?"

11. I'll Stand By You

[A/N: Longest chapter yet! I can't guarantee this will be the norm so let's just enjoy these lengthy chapters while we have them, shall we? lol]

Enjoy!]

Chapter 11: I'll Stand By You (by The Pretenders)

"Oh, why you look so sad? The tears are in your eyes, come on and come to me now. And don't be ashamed to cry. Let me see you through, 'cause I've seen the dark side, too..."

.....

Will felt a small amount of relief as he burst through the doors leading outside. If he slipped back out of the Upside Down, it'd be better to do it when he wasn't an unauthorized visitor in a lab that tried to fake his death.

The world outside was dark, as it always was in the Upside Down. Will jogged across the lot and back out into the woods, finally resting by a large, decaying tree when he felt he was a safe distance away from the lab.

Any minute now... Will impatiently wished to transfer back into the real Hawkins. He was getting pretty tired of this unpredictable back and forth but then, what could he do? He still hesitated at the idea of telling anyone about it but even if he *did* tell his mom or Jonathan or someone else, what could that do? He didn't even know *why* it was happening in the first place. He worked hard to suppress the worry that maybe he wouldn't be able to get out this time...

Resolving to sit outside and wait until either his friends made it to the Upside Down or he transferred back home, Will carefully knelt down in between the large roots of a rotting tree, avoiding directly sitting in a smear of brown slime as he did so.

Sighing, Will leaned his head back against the tree trunk, looking up

to the tree tops and the black sky. The trees were barren and white particles floated past his face, once again reminding him of a gentle snowfall. He imagined he was sitting outside at home in the woods behind his house, the soft snowflakes of a winter storm falling gracefully around him, the woods peacefully silent as a blanket of snow muted the typical echoes of leaves crunching, twigs snapping, creatures burrowing into the ground or meandering through the trees.

Before Will could get lost any further in his daydream, he felt something long and slimy touch his arm and when he looked down, a brown and yellow spotted slug was sliding up and over his arm.

"Ugh!" Will exclaimed in disgust and surprise, jumping up and wiping away the trail of goo left behind by the creature. The slug fell off his arm when he got up but quickly righted itself and slithered off into the woods at a surprising speed.

That one was kind of big... Will thought to himself as he watched the slug, twice the size of the ones he'd been vomiting, disappear into the foggy distance.

Deciding against sitting and getting comfortable, Will continued to walk deeper into the woods before coming upon a fallen log. Since his encounter with the large spotted slug, his eyes were peeled for more of them and like magic, he began to notice them everywhere. Anytime he settled his gaze in a particular direction, he'd see them - slugs of varying sizes and lengths sliding through tangles of vines and clinging to tree trunks. He'd seen them here and there back in November but there seemed to be more now. He also noticed several large yellow pods throughout the woods that seemed to glow from within. He remembered them from his time spent in the Upside Down last month but never paid much attention to them as he was more focused on keeping away from the Demogorgon.

As Will walked around the log, curious to see if there were more slugs living inside of the hollowed out tree trunk, he immediately noticed her.

Cradling her knees in a fetal position and shivering, he recognized El right away. "Uh, El?" He called to her cautiously. "Eleven?"

She didn't respond but her head moved slightly in the direction of his voice.

Will closed the distance between himself and the girl, kneeling down beside her. "Hey, are you okay?"

El looked up at him, her eyes wide and her eyebrows stitched together with an emotion he couldn't quite place. Fear? Concern? Confusion? She instead let out a whimper, resting her head against the ground in defeat, apparently unaware or unconcerned with the gooey slime just inches away from her head.

"Don't be afraid," Will said gently, looking her over. She didn't seem to be doing too well. Her head and face were soaking wet and there were deep circles under her eyes. Her face was splashed with weird bruises and he could see the veins beneath her skin. Her dress was dirty and tattered and she seemed to have almost no energy left. "I'm friends with Mike and Dustin and Lucas -"

"Will," She said, her voice fragile but confident.

"Yeah!" He replied, tucking his legs into a cross-legged position and scooting so that she didn't have to move her head to see him. His face fell once again as her eyes closed. "A-Are you okay?"

"Tired," Her voice was barely a whisper which worried him even more. Unsure of what to do, he tried patting her reassuringly on the shoulder. She flinched at the touch but didn't move, perhaps because she couldn't summon the strength.

"Don't worry," Will said, trying to comfort her. "Mike's on his way. Him and Dustin and Lucas. We all came to rescue you!"

The corners of El's lips twitched as if in the beginnings of a smile, though she kept her eyes closed. "Mike?"

"Yeah," Will said, nodding. "Just hold on, okay?"

"Not safe," El said, opening her eyes and making eye contact, an action that caught Will off-guard and made him surprisingly uncomfortable.

"What do you mean?" He asked, looking around. From what he could tell, everything looked normal. As normal as the Upside Down could look, that is. There weren't any monsters around that he could see - they were alone.

She slowly lifted her arm, shaking from the exertion as she did so, and pointed to him, poking her finger into his gut. "Not safe," She repeated and the serious look in her eyes made Will feel like his skin had been turned inside out.

"I-I don't understand," He stammered, following her finger to his stomach. "Me? I'm not safe?"

El's eyelids slowly began to lower as she gave a small nod in response. "Demogorgon,"

Now Will was really confused. "B-But I thought it was dead," He said, his voice rising in pitch slightly. "Wait a minute," Will tapped her shoulder as her eyelids closed and her movements stilled. "Don't go to sleep!"

The faint sound of voices in the distance caught Will's ear and he popped his head over the log to see his friends, along with an adult, approaching from the distance. Unsure what to make of this, he tried to remain hopeful for El who had become eerily motionless. Whoever it was that was with them, they didn't seem to be in any danger, at least from what he could tell.

"Wake up, El!" Will grabbed her arm and shook her, eliciting an uncomfortable murmur but nothing more. "I see them, okay? They're on their way. We're gonna get out of here, you just have to stay awake," He shook her again. "Can you hear me?"

He got no response other than another weak murmur. Galvanized, he stood up, taking a step back from El in order to draw the attention of his friends. Caught between concern for El's well-being and apprehension over the unknown adult escorting his friends through the Upside Down, Will chose to take the risk and attempt to catch the group's eye. However, as he stepped back, his foot came down on a small branch that had fallen from one of the tree limbs above, snapping it in half. In the blink of an eye, Will slipped back out of the

Upside Down, his boots crushing the snow beneath his feet as he found himself alone in the quiet of the woods outside the lab.

After debating whether to stay put or try to get back into the lab, Will decided to wait out in the woods and keep watch on the exit so he could see when his friends came out. After several minutes, he began to worry that something may have happened. Maybe Hopper or someone else found them and they were in trouble. But what could he do? He didn't have any weapons and his backpack was almost empty aside from his supercom, a compass, and a notebook. Just as he was considering calling Mike on the supercom, he saw four figures run out of the side of the building, farther away from where he was standing. Outside in the daylight, he recognized the adult with them as Hopper and in his arms, El's body dangled limply. Mike, Dustin, and Lucas kept up with Hopper's long strides as the four ran in the opposite direction, farther down the road.

Will cupped his hands over his mouth as he shouted, "Guys!" But no one turned. He began to run through the woods in an attempt to catch up to them, calling after them on the way, but they had a head start and he couldn't keep up. They disappeared around the corner and Will slowed to a stop in the street.

Judging by their sprint and the looks on their faces, even despite the distance between them, Will could tell that things were not looking good for El. The road was still covered in a sheet of snow as Will slipped out of his backpack and plopped it onto the snowy pavement. Retrieving his supercom, he took a minute to find the right channel.

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"Wait, we were supposed to turn there!" Lucas pointed as Hopper drove past the road leading to Hawkins' one and only hospital.

"We can't stay in Hawkins," Hopper replied bluntly. "We take her to a hospital in Hawkins and the wrong person sees her, her cover's blown wide open,"

"So where are you taking us?" Mike demanded, cradling El's head in his lap and inconspicuously keeping a finger resting against the side of her neck, a constant monitor of her heartbeat.

"We've gotta go somewhere that she isn't at risk of being recognized," Hopper replied simply, the idea crystallizing in his mind. "And we need a cover story for how we know her," He paused. "Or how we found her,"

"Like what?" Dustin asked.

Before Hopper could respond, radio static emanated from the backpack at Mike's feet.

"What's that?" Hopper glanced back.

They listened for a moment before Lucas recognized the garbled voice, "It's Will!"

Mike tried to reach for the bag but was unable to do so without jostling El. "Lucas, can you reach my backpack?"

Lucas pulled on his seat-belt, stretching it to allow himself the room to lean forward and pull the bag out from the small space behind Dustin's seat. He hastily unzipped the bag and pulled the supercom out.

"Will! Is that you? This is Lucas! Over,"

Will's voice came in, though slightly inaudibly. "It's me! Where - you? Over,"

"We're taking El to the hospital!" Mike leaned over closer to the supercom, speaking loudly.

"We're not gonna be able to hear you much longer 'cause we're going out of range," Lucas added. "Are you okay? Are you out of the Upside Down? Over,"

"- okay, - out," Will replied. "Which -"

Before Will could finish his sentence, the signal cut out.

"Dammit," Lucas huffed. "We lost him,"

"He said he was okay, right?" Mike asked.

"I guess," Lucas shrugged. "He said he was out of the Upside Down,"

Dustin's eyebrows suddenly went up and he turned around in his seat to face his friends. "You don't think he's still in the lab, do you?"

"What?" Mike's head shook slightly as though dumbfounded. "No," He paused, turning to Lucas. "Right?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Lucas threw up his hands.

Mike rolled his eyes. "No," He said, a little more confidently. "He sounded like he was fine. He would've said something if he was still in there, right?"

"You're probably right," Lucas admitted, settling back into the seat and looking out the window as they turned onto an unfamiliar highway. "Um, where are we going again?"

"Relax," Hopper said gruffly, anticipating another round of questioning. "We're almost there," He paused, adding, "We're in Clarksville,"

"Where the heck is Clarksville?" Lucas asked Mike and Dustin under his breath, to which he received exaggerated shrugs.

"So what happens when we get there?" Mike asked.

Hopper was quiet for a moment as he assessed the plan he'd been working through in his head during the drive. "We take her to the E.R. If anyone asks, she's my daughter. She's been missing and we found her in the woods. I'll take care of the rest,"

The boys silently accepted this plan, impatiently watching barren deciduous trees and snow-covered evergreens pass by as they made their way down the road. Thankfully, the main roads had already seen a snowplow and much of the previous night's snowfall was melting enough to allow for somewhat normal driving speeds.

Mike gingerly rested a hand on El's arm, keeping a watchful eye on the shallow rise and fall of her torso as she breathed as his other hand inconspicuously monitored her pulse with the backs of his fingers.

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They arrived at Clarksville General Hospital only a few minutes later, though it'd felt like much longer. Hopper pulled into the loop outside of the emergency room, turning his hazard lights on before hopping out of the car and throwing open the backdoor.

"Alright, let's go! Let's go!" He sounded like a drill sergeant as he ushered the boys out, scooping El into his arms and jogging around the side of the car as the boys shut their respective car doors and followed closely behind.

The automatic sliding doors couldn't keep up with Hopper's pace and he impatiently waited for them to open before rushing up to the front desk.

The receptionist, an older woman with pressed curls and wide-frame glasses, took note of El's condition right away. "What do we have?" She asked, standing up.

"My daughter," Hopper said urgently as he cradled El in his arms. She was so light it barely felt like she was there. "She's been missing for a few days and her friends just found her out in the woods in the cold," He had barely spoken the words before several nurses had already rushed out with a gurney for El. "She-she's been in and out of consciousness and we had to do CPR once," Hopper said in a tight voice as the nurses secured El to the gurney and the boys watched, partly fascinated by Hopper's convincing description of what had happened but mostly worried about El.

"What's her name?" The receptionist asked as the nurses began to roll El out of the reception area and to the back.

"Wait!" Mike yelled. "Where are they taking her?" He started to jog toward the swinging double doors through which they'd disappeared. "We've gotta go -"

"Mike!" Dustin called after his friend.

"Young man," The receptionist turned her attention to Mike, her voice calm and soothing. "We're going to do everything we can to help her

but I'm afraid you can't go back there yet,"

"What? No!" Mike shook his head. "I can't leave her! I-"

"Mike," Hopper said, his tone low and even, a warning.

Mike narrowed his eyes, biting his lip as he begrudgingly walked back to his friends by the desk, crossing his arms and training his eyes on the doors.

"As you were saying, sir?" The receptionist continued with Hopper. "Her name?"

"Oh, um," Hopper stalled long enough to double-check the name he'd decided in the car. "Her name's Jane. Jane Eleanor Hopper,"

Dustin shot an amused look to Lucas and Mike but Mike's attention was elsewhere, his brow furrowed as he tried to stand on his tip-toes and peer through the small windows in the double-doors.

"Why don't you kids go sit down?" Hopper said over his shoulder, keenly aware of the way Mike bobbed and swayed on the balls of his feet, trying to see beyond the desk and through the doors.

"When can we see El?" Mike asked, his arms out as he gestured impatiently.

Hopper turned to face the boys, his back turning away from the receptionist. *Go. Sit. Down.* He mouthed, his eyes fixed and his brow set in an intimidating gaze. Finally obliging, the boys trudged over to an open row of chairs with Dustin and Lucas taking turns darting glances at their visibly distraught and frustrated friend.

"What if something happens to her?" Mike said animatedly once they'd sat down. "What if the bad men know we're here and they're back there? What if she wakes up and she's scared? She's *alone!*"

"Hey," Dustin said gently, patting his friend's shoulder. "They think she's still in the Upside Down, right?"

"Yeah, Mike," Lucas agreed in the most comforting tone he could muster. "She's probably fine. I mean, we drove all this way so no one

would recognize her, right?"

"Yeah," Dustin said bluntly. "Assuming we really can trust Hopper,"

Lucas reached over Mike and whacked Dustin on the arm. "Dustin, shut up!"

Mike paid little attention to them, however, as his gaze fell to the floor and his foot bounced erratically. He fidgeted with a hangnail on his thumb, trying to curb the nervous energy coursing through him.

"He's coming over," Lucas announced, noticing Hopper approaching from across the lobby and all three of them looked up at the police chief expectantly.

"I'm going back to check her status now," He explained once he was standing in front of them. "When I know more, I'll come get you boys. Until then, try not to make a scene and draw attention to yourselves out here, alright?" The boys quietly nodded, except Mike who simply continued to stare at the floor. "Just sit tight," And with that, he walked away, passing through the double-doors leading to the back and disappearing from sight.

The wait was agonizing. There wasn't much to say and Mike was so noticeably uncomfortable and quiet that neither Lucas nor Dustin felt inclined to talk much. They were all worried about El and whether she would be okay, both physically and with regards to the lab employees finding out where she was. As much as Hopper was proving himself to be trustworthy, they were still uncertain given everything they'd learned in just a few short hours.

Mike zoned out, fixing his gaze on the pastel yellow linoleum floors. They were in the middle of flu season and it was difficult to ignore the sounds of people around them retching into little pink vomit troughs, coughing up phlegm into dozens of tissues, and generally groaning with discomfort. As time passed, more people filed into the waiting area and some were left to stand idly by as they waited to be seen. Dustin got up at one point and offered his seat on the end of the row to an elderly woman who'd come in with her son, moving over to stand by Lucas.

Mike was lost in thought. He was all but vaguely aware of his surroundings, his mind teeming with thoughts of El - wondering if she was awake, what was wrong with her, if they could make her better, when she would be better, when he could see her. He thought about how much of a relief it'd been to hear her voice, even if it was only for a brief moment as she uttered his name before passing out. It wasn't a dream, he wasn't unconscious. She'd been there, right in front of him. Her eyes meeting his, her voice as soft and delicate as he'd remembered it. All these weeks he'd spent mourning the loss of her and wondering if he'd ever forget her voice or what she looked like came rushing back and he had been overwhelmed at how good it felt to realize that he hadn't forgotten. Despite her ill condition and appearance, she was just as he'd remembered and he took some comfort in that.

But waiting was painful. He wanted to be with her, holding her hand and reassuring her that he would stay by her side. What if she was scared? What if she thought he'd abandoned her? His chest tightened and his heart sunk at the thought.

Lucas lightly swatted Mike on the shoulder, pulling him from his thoughts as Hopper approached.

Mike immediately jumped up. "How is she? Is she okay? Can we see her?" He blurted out the words faster than Hopper could think to respond to any of the questions.

Hopper put his hands on his hips, pursing his lips. "She's stable, but she's unconscious," He said flatly, hesitating. "They've got her in a medically-induced coma, she-"

"*What?!*" Mike exclaimed, drawing the attention of everyone waiting nearby.

"Mike, come on," Lucas said, grabbing Mike's arm and encouraging him to sit down but Mike ripped his arm out of his friend's grasp.

"No!" Mike shook his head, trying to process what was going on. "Wha- Why? What's wrong with her?"

"They said she had brain swelling and a concussion," Hopper replied,

shooting a glare to the nosey onlookers who hurriedly averted their gazes and attention elsewhere. "They aren't sure of the cause but they put her in the coma so her brain could rest and the swelling will hopefully go down,"

"Why would she have brain swelling?" Mike thought aloud.

"Maybe from using her -" Dustin began to speculate but Lucas elbowed him in the side.

"Agh!" Dustin yelped. "Hey!"

"*Ixnay the owerspay*," Lucas muttered forcefully, casting a pointed look around the crowded room.

"Regardless," Hopper continued. "They're getting her set up in a room in ICU now and they're gonna keep an eye on her,"

"Can we visit her?" Lucas asked, beating Mike to the question.

"Yes -" Hopper began and the boys immediately jumped up. He stopped them, standing in their way as he continued, "But not for long. I've gotta make a call so go up to the reception desk and the woman there will tell you where to go," They started to move past him again and he once again stopped them, adding in a lowered voice, "Remember what I said. *Don't* draw attention to yourselves,"

"Okay," The boys muttered, nodding their agreement as Hopper let them pass and they trotted off to see El.

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"*Chief Hopper?*" The woman on the phone sounded surprised. "Wasn't expecting to hear from *you*," She laughed sardonically.

"Yeah, well," Hopper mumbled as he leaned against the wall by the pay phone in a corner of the waiting area. "Here's the deal, I need you to get down to Clarksville's emergency room,"

"What the hell?" The woman said, her voice tight, then relaxing as if taking a drag on a cigarette. "Why?"

"I'll tell you more when you get here but it's important," Hopper insisted, adding. "Trust me, you're gonna want to hear this. So can you get down here?"

The woman paused for a moment. "Alright," She said hesitantly, as though she wasn't so sure it'd be worth it but obliging nonetheless. "Lemme make some arrangements and I'll be over within the hour,"

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A stout, middle-aged nurse with dyed black hair and grey at her roots escorted the boys back to El's room. Each hallway they passed through looked like the last and the smell of disinfectant mingled with the smell of various bodily fluids as they made their way through the hospital's corridors. Some doors and windows into the patients' rooms were open. One elderly man was sitting up in bed, coughing into a napkin. Another middle-aged woman was lying back in bed, asleep with her mouth agape as she snored and the TV in her room playing a rerun of Wheel of Fortune.

The ICU was set up differently. In the center was a large, rectangular counter with multiple desks on the interior that served as the nurses' station and all around the perimeter were patient rooms with doors open and clear windows with the curtains pulled so the nurse's could see into the rooms as necessary.

"She's right in there," the nurse escorting them gestured to a room labeled '110B'. "She's in a deep sleep but feel free to talk to her," the woman said gently.

"Can she hear us?" Dustin asked as they stopped in front of the room.

"I like to think so," she smiled warmly. "If you need anything, you can ask someone here at the nurses' station and they'll be able to help you," She pointed to the long counter and collection of desks behind her. "Did you have any other questions for me?"

"When is she gonna wake up?" Mike asked quickly and the nurse's face softened with sympathy.

"I'm sorry, honey," She said. "There's no timetable on that. We've just

gotta wait for her to heal and go from there,"

Disappointed, Mike looked down at his feet.

"Okay, thank you," Lucas said to the nurse and she gave them a small smile before heading off in the direction they'd come.

Peering through the doorway, it was impossible to feel anything other than uncomfortable and concerned at the sight of El in that hospital bed. There were tubes in her nose and IVs in her arm that connected to various pieces of equipment beside her. Next to her bed, a hanging bag with clear liquid inside dripped steadily as the beat of her heart on the monitor matched its rhythm. The dirt had been wiped from her face and a mass of wires were connected to electrodes attached to her head, monitoring her brain waves on a separate machine.

The boys tentatively filed into the room. Mike approached her side right away, as did Lucas though he stood closer to the foot of the bed. Dustin walked around to the other side, surveying the brain wave print-outs that were coming from the monitor.

"So this is what El's brain does," He quirked his head at the squiggles on the page. "I have *no* idea what *any* of this means," He quipped, shrugging as he looked down at El.

"Well she isn't..." Lucas carefully considered his words. "*Doing* anything right now so whatever it says, it's probably normal, right?"

Dustin shrugged, looking to Mike who was standing close to El's head and fidgeting with his hands, his eyes never leaving her. Dustin and Lucas noted their friend's behavior, exchanging a glance.

"So El," Dustin began, speaking to her as though everything was normal. "Room 110, huh? It's too bad they couldn't give you 111," He grinned at his own joke, then sobered at the distinct lack of response before sighing.

"We're all here, El," Lucas spoke up, feeling slightly awkward but talking nonetheless. "Except Will," He turned to Dustin, then Mike, then back to Dustin. "We've gotta get ahold of Will,"

"There's no way he'd be in range now," Dustin surmised.

"Maybe we should call him," Lucas said. "Do you think he'd be home yet?" He looked at Mike who only shrugged.

"Probably," Dustin guessed.

Lucas looked at Mike who had been all but completely disengaged from their conversation, instead watching El and soaking in every minute detail of the hospital bed and the machines surrounding them.

"Why don't we go do that?" Lucas said to Dustin, jerking a thumb back at the door and gesturing to Mike with his eyes. Dustin got the hint.

"Yeah," He nodded, coming around the side of the bed. "We'll be back, El," He said cheerily to the unconscious girl.

"We're gonna try and find Will," Lucas added, stepping away from the bed.

"You guys go ahead," Mike finally spoke, turning his head to them. "I'm gonna stay here,"

"Don't worry about it," Lucas waved a hand at him. "We got it, we'll be back,"

Mike listened as his friends' footsteps and voices got further and further away down the hall. Now alone in the room with El, the steady beat of her heart monitor providing the same reassurance his fingers against her neck had once provided, Mike found himself strangely nervous.

He wanted to speak, he'd been dying to talk to her, but now that he had the chance to speak freely, he wasn't sure what to say. His words died in his throat before he could get anything out. Instead, he found himself watching her, studying her, willing her to wake up and look at him.

Should he talk about normal things like school and Christmas or tell her about their adventure in finding her? Should he tell her about

what was going on with Will or about the weird dreams he'd been having about her?

That was when an idea struck.

If she could communicate with him when *he* was sleeping or unconscious... could he do the same with her? Would she still somehow be able to tune in to what he was saying? Assuming he actually *had* been communicating with her before and it wasn't just his imagination. But that'd be too much of a coincidence, right?

It was worth a shot.

"Hey El," He ventured, his voice shaky and unsure. "It's Mike," The stillness of her expressionless face was disconcerting but he pushed himself to keep talking. He imagined her doe eyes looking up with eager fascination and wonder, vividly remembering her small, hesitant smiles and the wide, toothy ones when she felt completely comfortable. "Hey uh, remember when I showed you my dad's La-Z-Boy?" One corner of his mouth quirked up in a half-smile, remembering how she'd transformed from timid and terrified to laughing and smiling broadly like a real kid, if only for a few minutes. "Um... wh-when you wake up, there's still a lot of other stuff I'd like to show you," He paused. "We just had Christmas and - well, I guess you probably don't know what Christmas is. It's this holiday where you give gifts to people like your friends and your family and you decorate the house and the yard with lights and fake snow and stuff," He shrugged, casually leaning against the thin mattress of her hospital bed. "I uh, I missed you... El," His words were quiet and came out awkwardly but somehow talking to her was becoming easier as he went on. He remembered the disappointment he'd felt on the day of the Snowball, choosing instead to stay home and forget about it, though that'd proven to be impossible. He winced, pushing the thought out of his head.

Glancing down, then back to her face, Mike tentatively picked up El's hand in his, careful not to disturb the IVs attached to her arm as he rested her palm against his and lightly rubbed his thumb against her skin. "I don't know if you can hear me," Mike said softly. "But um, if you can, I hope you wake up soon," He stood stock still, nervous over the way he was feeling and the things he was saying but also afraid

of doing something wrong that would knock out an IV or somehow mess up one of her machines. "I-I'm sorry we didn't get to you sooner," He said, his voice faltering slightly. "I hope you're okay... And... um... I'm sorry we didn't get to go to the Snowball," He grimaced, furrowing his brow. Even if she was unconscious, he felt the need to keep from crying in front of her. "I know I said friends don't break promises," He paused. "I tried, El. I didn't know where you went or how to find you a-and we finally figured it out but now you're -" He cut himself off as tears flushed his eyes and he pawed at his face with the back of his free hand. "But you're gonna be alright, okay El? You just have to wake up," Mike said, forcing his voice to remain steady. "A-and I promise I'm not going anywhere. Just please get better," His voice was soft and he sighed, willing her to open her eyes and smile at him as she'd done so many times before.

.....

"Won't let nobody hurt you, I'll stand by you..."

12. With or Without You

[A/N: Hello all and happy belated merry Christmas! XD I hope those of you who celebrate had a fabulous holiday! I've been a bit busy, hence the delay in updating, so my apologies!

Thank you SO MUCH to everyone who reviewed this story. It is so motivating to hear that you guys like what I'm doing and are curious to know what's going to happen! I really appreciate it!

I anticipate getting started on the next chapter tonight so hopefully there won't be as much time in between updates but please review and let me know your thoughts/reactions/predictions. It really helps the mojo! :)

With that being said, enjoy! :)]

Chapter 12: With or Without You (by U2)

"See the stone set in your eyes, see the thorn twist in your side. I wait for you..."

.....

Despite the increasing temperatures as the day wore on, the air outside was still quite crisp as Hopper took a long drag on his cigarette, watching the smoke float past him as a gust of wind pulled it along. The parking lot was packed at this point and he was glad he'd moved his SUV earlier when he had the chance, otherwise he probably would've ended up parking a block away from the looks of it. He watched as a small green car pulled into the loop and through the windshield, he recognized the woman's face. Taking one last drag on his cigarette, he dropped the butt to the pavement and stomped it out with his boot. The woman didn't see him, immediately turning into the parking lot rather than pulling around through the ER drop-off loop. Hopper watched as the car circled around through row after row in the parking lot until finally pulling up alongside the sidewalk where he stood. Hopper stepped down off the curb, walking around the car to meet her at her door.

Smoke billowed out from the tailpipe of the old car and he could hear something rattling under the hood. The woman turned the engine off and crawled out of the driver's seat, standing in the crook between the car and her door as she leaned against her car door frame.

"Hey Becky," Hopper greeted her in an even tone.

"So," Becky began, furrowing her brow curiously at the police chief. "You call me up outta nowhere about some big news I just *need* to know... What's going on?"

"Why don't we go sit down and talk?" Hopper suggested, gesturing to a metal bench over against the concrete walls of the hospital, several paces from the entrance.

Becky quirked an eyebrow. "Alright... Ya know you're freakin' me out a little here..." She said as she hesitantly pushed the car door closed and followed the police chief over to the bench. The metal was cold against her legs, even through her denim jeans, and she crossed her arms, waiting for him to explain what was so important that he was up here in Clarksville and summoning her to a hospital no less.

Hopper sat down on the bench beside her, resting his forearms against his knees and clasping his hands together as he contemplated how to begin this conversation. He only hoped he was doing the right thing.

"Alright," He said after a long pause. "Do you remember when Joyce Byers and I came to your house to try and talk to your sister?"

Becky's incredulous and confused expression only deepened. "You mean, the *one and only* other time I've met you?" She said sarcastically. "Well, yeah?"

"Okay," Hopper exhaled sharply. "I think there's something you should know... or well, someone you should meet,"

"Who?" Becky asked, her eyes never leaving him.

He paused a moment longer, questioning himself for the last time if this was the right thing to do. As he understood it, Eleven didn't have any other family. Sure, he was pretending to be her dad for the

purposes of getting her treated but then what? Where would she go and who would she live with? The obvious answer was to find blood relatives - that's what Child Protective Services would do if they were involved. Becky deserved to know that she had a niece and that her sister was telling the truth. Terry deserved to meet her daughter after everything she'd gone through. And shouldn't this girl know she has real family out there? Besides, if she lived with the Ives' she'd be well away from the lab and less likely to run into any government agents looking for her. It would be safer than staying in Hawkins, surely. Did he feel some strange pang of hesitation? Sure he did. For some odd reason that girl had reminded him of his daughter and to claim her as his own in the hospital struck chords he wasn't anticipating. But still, he was the police chief. This was the right thing to do, according to the law, according to every ethics training class they'd made him sit through in the academy. The fact that she apparently didn't have any record of existing didn't make matters any easier. Getting her a social security number and documentation would be a struggle and they'd have to figure that out at some point. Wouldn't it be easier, *better*, if she was with her true family? In close proximity to the woman who actually gave birth to her? Even if that woman was more or less a vegetable at this point. At the very least, they deserved to know that she existed, that she was alive, and more immediately, that she was in very serious condition in the ICU. And they didn't need to know she had powers. They didn't need to know anything more than that Terry actually did have a daughter and that she was here.

Hopper inhaled deeply. It was now or never. He hoped he was right. "Your niece,"

Becky stared at him for a minute, her eyes scanning his face, trying to read him as her expression morphed to one of confusion, then amusement. She opened her mouth to speak but the words didn't come right away. "...*What?*" She said, almost laughing.

Hopper's demeanor never faltered. He maintained his eye contact with her, speaking simply and solemnly. "What if I told you Terry had that baby and she's inside this hospital," He said, watching her dubious expression.

Becky shook her head in disbelief, still laughing hesitantly. "No, that

doesn't make any sense," She said, reaching into her jacket pocket and retrieving a pack of cigarettes, fumbling as she pulled one out and stuck it between her lips. "You're shittin' me," She said pointedly as she patted her other pockets looking for a lighter. Hopper pulled one out of his own pocket and offered her a light. Becky leaned in, puffing on her cigarette as the end caught the flame. "Why'd you really call me out here?"

"It's the truth, Becky," Hopper said steadily, returning his lighter to his back pocket as Becky took a long drag on her cigarette and leaned back against the metal backing of the bench. "She just turned up recently and she's in critical condition in the ICU,"

"What the *fuck*?" Becky shook her head, still having trouble processing this information. "Do you realize how crazy you sound?" She narrowed her eyes skeptically. "That doesn't make any sense," She counted off on her fingers. "There was no hospital record, no birth certificate -"

"It's her, Becky," Hopper shook his head, his voice unwavering.

"Oh yeah?" Becky challenged, taking a deep drag and meeting his gaze. "What proof do you have?"

Hopper sighed. What could he tell her that would convince her but not reveal too much too soon? Now was not the time to tell her about El's powers... if there would ever be such a time. "Look," He began. "I know this is hard to believe. But just like there was no record on the baby Terry lost, there's no record on *this* girl ever existing either. You said Terry lose her baby in 1971, well *this* kid is 12,"

Becky paused, her uncertainty pulling her back and forth. The likelihood of this child being her niece seemed impossible. But there was still a part of her that'd always wondered if her sister had been telling the truth all this time. Terry had gone to *court* for pete's sake over it. After everything that had happened and the lack of evidence and then Terry losing her mind, it'd been easy to dismiss all of her claims as the crazy talk of a drug-riddled mind. A small spark of curiosity rose within her but she pushed it down. It just didn't make sense.

"Excuse me, Mr. Hopper?" The receptionist from the ER desk appeared in front of them, the thin cardigan around her shoulders doing little to keep out the cold as her hair blew with the wind.

Hopper quickly leaned in and whispered into Becky's ear. "*Go with me on this,*"

"Yes ma'am," Hopper said politely, standing up.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt but there is the matter of payment," She said gently, gesturing to the clipboard in her hand. "You didn't indicate your insurance provider on the forms,"

Hopper shook his head. "She doesn't have insurance," He said simply. "You can just bill it straight to me,"

The receptionist's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Oh, of course," She said apologetically. "Thank you," She nodded respectfully toward Becky. "You must be Mrs. Hopper, I'm very sorry -"

"What? No!" Becky exclaimed.

Hopper placed a hand on Becky's shoulder. "This is my sister-in-law," He explained effortlessly. "Jane's mother is ill, I'm afraid,"

The receptionist's face deflated in sympathy as Becky shot an incredulous look up at Hopper. "I'm quite sorry to hear that," The receptionist offered. "Well, I'll leave you to your business. Thank you for clarifying, Mr. Hopper," She gestured to the clipboard again before turning and heading back into the hospital.

Becky just stared at Hopper, shaking her head. "You're outta your damn mind,"

Hopper sighed, the slightest hint of impatience seeping into his voice. "Look," He said bluntly. "You don't have to believe me and it's fine if you don't. Maybe you'll regret it, maybe you won't. But I'm trying to do what's *right* here and at the very least you should *meet* her,"

Becky cast a sideways glance at him, pausing for a moment before sighing in resignation. "Alright, I'll meet the kid," She conceded. "But I still think you've got the wrong family,"

"Well, maybe I do," Hopper muttered sarcastically as he escorted Becky back into the hospital.

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After losing connection with his friends, Will had made his way home as quickly as he could. Home was a lot closer than Hawkins Memorial Hospital and without his bike *and* in the snow, there was no way he'd get to the hospital in a decent amount of time.

His mom was asleep on the couch, still dressed in her work vest after a late night shift at the store, but Barney's incessant barking and scratching at the door as Will unlocked and opened the door caused her to stir.

"Hey honey," Joyce mumbled into the pillow, her eyes still closed as Will darted past.

"Hey mom," He called before turning down the hallway and knocking on Jonathan's door. "Jonathan?" Will called, bouncing on his heels for a moment before his brother opened the door.

"Hey," Jonathan greeted, his hair wild and bedraggled from sleep despite having been up for hours. "I thought you were at the Wheelers'?"

"I was," Will said hurriedly. "But can you give me a ride to the hospital?"

Jonathan's eyes widened with panic. "What, why? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" Will insisted, pushing the thought of his slug-vomiting and inter-dimensional travel out of his mind for now. "They _"

"What's this about going to the hospital?" Joyce appeared at the other end of the hall, her hair equally bedraggled and her eyes alert and wary. "Did something happen?"

"They found El!" Will explained, looking back and forth between his brother and mother. "They're taking her to the hospital. Can either of you give me a ride?"

"Oh.. my..." Joyce's hand flew up to her mouth. "Yes, of course," She nodded definitively. "We'll take my car,"

"I'll go, too," Jonathan said, quickly plopping down on his bed and stuffing his feet into his boots.

Will jumped when the phone suddenly began to ring. "I'll get it!" He called, bounding toward the new green phone attached to the kitchen wall. Barney jumped around him, excited by the commotion. "Hello?"

"Dude!" Dustin's voice came over the line. "You're home!"

"Yeah," Will said. "What's up? You guys are at the hospital, right?"

"Yeah, we're here," Dustin replied. "Lucas is on the line, too,"

"Hey Will," Lucas cut in.

"My mom and Jonathan are getting ready then we're heading over," Will said, watching as his mom trotted back into the bathroom.

"Okay, well we're in Clarksville," Dustin said.

"Clarksville?" Will quirked an eyebrow. "Where's that?"

"It's like 20 minutes north of Hawkins if you take route 91," Lucas supplied.

"Damn, I didn't know you were paying attention," Dustin quipped.

"*Meh meh eh*," Lucas mocked.

"Hey mom!" Will called out, ignoring his friends' banter. "They're in Clarksville,"

Joyce poked her head out from the bathroom doorframe. "Clarksville? Why -" She halted, realization dawning on her. "Is Hopper with them?"

"Is Hopper with you guys?" Will parroted into the phone, then turned back to his mom. "Yeah, he is,"

Joyce's mind whirled but she kept her thoughts to herself. "Alright,"

She said after a brief pause. "We'll be leaving in two minutes!"

"We're leaving soon, guys," Will said into the phone receiver. "Is El okay?"

"She's in a coma," Lucas replied.

"Mike's pretty messed up," Dustin commented.

"Yeah," Lucas agreed. "He's in there with her now,"

"She's in a *coma*?" Will repeated, surprised.

"Yeah, medically-induced," Dustin said. "She had brain swelling. She's supposed to be okay but they don't actually know much yet,"

"Really, we haven't been *told* much yet," Lucas translated, more cynically.

"Alright, let's go," Joyce called out as she blew down the hall and into the living room, grabbing her keys from the spot she'd left them on the coffee table the night before.

"I've gotta go," Will said. "We're on our way,"

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Dustin and Lucas returned to El's room moments later to find Mike gently holding her hand. Remnants of tears stained his cheeks and he hastily wiped his face when he heard them come in.

"Is Will okay?" Mike turned as his friends entered the room. "Is he coming?"

"He's fine," Lucas responded. "He's on his way with his mom and Jonathan,"

"How's El doing?" Dustin asked.

Mike shrugged, looking down at her peaceful form. "Fine, I guess,"

"Did Hopper ever come back?" Lucas wondered just as the police chief entered with an unfamiliar woman.

"Who's that?" Mike immediately blurted out.

Hopper shot a warning look at the young boy before introducing his companion. "This is Becky Ives," He said, gesturing to the petite woman who looked as awkward as she surely felt in that situation. "She's a... relative," He offered and Becky fought the urge to roll her eyes. "She came to see El,"

"El?" Becky parroted, confused.

"Short for Eleven," Dustin supplied but the young woman's confusion only deepened.

"*Eleven?*" She looked to Hopper with wide eyes.

"I'll explain later," He muttered.

"Wait, what *relative?*" Mike asked, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Your guess is as good as mine, kid," Becky quipped and Hopper rolled his eyes, huffing in controlled frustration.

"It's *possible*," Hopper shot a pointed look at the short brunette beside him. "That she may be El's aunt - her *real* aunt,"

"What?!" Dustin exclaimed, eyes wide in surprise.

"No way," Lucas murmured, one eyebrow raised.

"Says who?" Mike challenged, his brow furrowed defensively.

Becky chuckled, jerking a thumb to the moppy-haired boy. "I kinda like this kid,"

"Alright, that's enough," Hopper said firmly, grabbing everyone's full attention. "I brought Becky in here to meet El so why don't you kids go call your parents and let them know where you are, huh?" He herded them out of the room, Mike reluctantly letting go of El's hand as he shuffled out of the room with his friends.

"Okay," Hopper said, closing the door once the boys were outside. Becky was looking down at the young girl before them, her face

contorted in an unreadable expression. Hopper sidled up next to her and glanced between Becky's face and El.

Becky slowly approached El's bedside, staring at the girl's face with a curious sense of recognition. "She looks just like Terry when we were kids..." She said softly, turning to face Hopper. "What happened to her hair?"

Hopper shook his head. "It's a long story,"

Becky turned back to El, crossing her arms and soaking in every detail of the young girl's face. "I thought you were crazy," She chortled, then added more softly, "I thought Terry was crazy...All these years...She was right?" The realization that her sister had been telling the truth all this time and that her baby had actually grown up away from her for years was difficult to swallow. "Is it all true then? Everything she was saying about the government... *taking* Jane?" Becky turned to Hopper again, her eyes glistening with the threat of tears.

Hopper pursed his lips, then sighed. "Here, come sit down," He gestured to a wooden chair with a dark blue cushion in the corner of the room. "Let's talk,"

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Mike splashed water from the bathroom sink at his face, slapping his cheeks to try and shake himself out of the weird fog he'd been in ever since they found El in dire condition. His eyes were red around the edges from crying and dark and puffy underneath from lack of sleep the night before. He knew his friends were outside waiting for him but he needed a minute to get himself together.

The boys decided it made more sense to just call home to Mike's mom to let her know what was going on, skipping over certain details of course. Getting Dustin and Lucas' parents involved would only make things complicated and they expected the boys to be at the Wheelers' house anyway. Since they'd stayed the night at Mike's, if anyone should call home to check in, it would be Mike. But that could wait a few more minutes.

Memories swirled through Mike's head - the ups and downs of his first week with El, the sights and sounds of the Upside Down, her stoic face as she lay in that hospital bed. What was going to happen to her? What if she didn't wake up? The thought frightened Mike and he had to fight with himself to keep from crying again. He'd come into the bathroom to calm down, not fall apart.

Why was this even happening? Why did she have to do this? They could've found some other way to fight the Demogorgon and El wouldn't have been sucked into the Upside Down. They *could have made it work*.

No, they couldn't. El saved them. She was the only reason they were alive now.

The thought brought on another angry onslaught of tears and Mike growled in frustration, leaning back against the white counter, pawing at his face with the base of his palms.

How was he even supposed to explain what was happening to his mom without her freaking out? He knew his voice would give away the fact that he was sort of a mess. He *needed* to get it together. He hated how much he'd been crying and he hated the fact that there wasn't anything he could do about it. He was completely helpless, only able to hope and pray that El would pull through. But what if she didn't? What if they didn't get to her in time? He'd have to live with that for the rest of his life and how could he? He'd *promised* her a life unlike anything she'd ever known before, as far as he knew, and he'd failed. The guilt felt like a wave crashing down on him again and again.

"Mike, are you okay in there?" Lucas knocked on the bathroom door, pushing it open slightly to let his voice through.

"I'm coming!" Mike snapped back, a little more harshly than he'd intended. Sighing, he turned the faucet back on, cupping his hands under the water and splashing his face one more time before drying off with a paper towel and heading back out to the waiting area.

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*"Through the storm, we reach the shore. You give it all but I want more,
and I'm waiting for you..."*

13. The Flame

[A/N: Hey everyone. Happy New Year! I hope you all had some great holidays.

I was planning on this chapter being longer but I've had a crappy day and despite being bummed, I wanted to get SOMETHING out so here we are. I hope you all like this and I'll try to get the next chapter out as soon as I can. Sorry, my mojo's just blah today :/

Peace, y'all.]

Chapter 13: The Flame (by Cheap Trick)

"Wherever you go, I'll be with you. Whatever you want, I'll give it to you. Whenever you need someone to lay your heart and head upon..."

.....

"You okay, Mike?" Lucas asked as Mike emerged from the bathroom but Mike brushed past his friends and out into the waiting area.

"I'm fine," He muttered distantly as they walked over to the payphone in the corner.

"Here, I've got a quarter," Dustin offered, digging a coin from deep in the pocket of his jeans and handing it over.

Mike slipped the coin into the slot, dialing his home number and trying to figure out what he was going to say. He was surprised when Nancy picked up instead of his mom.

"Mike?!" She exclaimed when she realized it was him. "Where the hell have you been? Mom is losing her shit!"

"What?" Mike contorted his face. "Why?"

"Um, hello?" Nancy replied, exasperated. "You and your friends have been gone half the day and you weren't here when she woke up," She explained. "You know you're supposed to tell her when you're leaving

the house, especially after everything that happened..." She let her voice trail off. She didn't need to explain what she was alluding to. "She woke up and you weren't here and she's been calling all over Hawkins -"

"She didn't call Dust -" Dustin and Lucas watched Mike with wide eyes, trying to gauge what was happening in the conversation.

"Yes, she called Dustin and Lucas' parents, too," Nancy cut him off. "Where the hell are you?"

"Um," Mike looked to his friends, shaking his head with a wary look and Lucas threw his hands up as Dustin held his head in his hands.

"*Shit, shit, shit...*" Dustin muttered, shaking his head.

"What's going on?" Lucas whispered anxiously to Mike. "Your mom told our parents she didn't know where we were?!"

Mike batted at him to be quiet as he continued to talk into the receiver, "Uh..." He hesitated.

"What's going on, Mike?" Nancy's tone softened. "Is everything okay?"

At that, Mike pursed his lips and he willed himself to keep it together better. He did his best to force his emotions back down but they were still evident in the shakiness of his voice. "Do you remember El?" He shut his eyes tightly, as if the force and pressure of doing so could keep him from crying again. He so desperately did *not* want to start crying again. Especially not in a crowded waiting room, in front of his friends, on the phone with his sister.

Nancy paused. "Yeah," She said hesitantly. "What about her?"

"She's in the hospital," Mike's voice was robotic and awkward, but he took a breath and was able to keep himself steady. "Um, we found her today and she's kind of in a *coma*," His voice rose in pitch, the only indication of his current internal state. "So we've been at the hospital,"

"Holy shit, Mike," Nancy breathed, unsure of what to say.

"I was calling to let mom know where we are," Mike added, finding his steadiness again. "We're in Clarksville,"

"Oh wow," Nancy commented. "Are you guys there by yourselves?"

"No," Mike shook his head automatically. "The Chief's here with us,"

"Oh," Nancy's relief was evident in the way her voice relaxed. "Okay, well, Mom just got back. I'll put her on the line in a sec,"

Mike quirked an eyebrow. "Where'd she go?"

"She was driving around looking for you guys..." Nancy admitted. "I'm telling you, she was freaking out. It's almost four in the afternoon!"

"I know, I know," Mike said guiltily. "I should've called earlier..."

Nancy paused. "I hope El's okay," She offered kindly.

"Thanks," Mike mumbled and a pause fell over the conversation before Nancy handed the phone over to their mom.

"*Michael?!'*" He'd been bracing himself for his mom's angry, worried tone, but it was still jarring coming through the phone.

"Yeah, it's me," He said blankly. "I'm sorry I didn't call earlier,"

"Where the *hell* have you been?" His mom exclaimed. "Where are you? Do you know how *terrifying* it is to walk downstairs in the morning and find *not only your son* is gone but also *his friends* that you're responsible for? After everything that happened last month with Will and Barb..." She paused for a second and Mike almost began to respond but she kept going. "What were you *thinking?*"

"*Mom!*" Mike shouted into the phone before she could continue on her rant. "I'm *sorry*, it was an emergency,"

"An emergency?" Karen's tone changed immediately. "What kind of emergency? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, okay?" Mike replied curtly. "It's -it's our friend," His voice

was brusque, a shield against becoming too emotional. He hadn't gone into too much detail with his mom about El. After Will returned home, he'd explained that she had been a runaway from an abusive father and she'd helped them find Will. She'd been with them at the school the night they fought off the Demogorgon but then she'd disappeared and they hadn't heard from her since. Somehow he hadn't wanted to have to explain El's powers to his mom and Hopper had told everyone that night that they had to keep what they knew about the lab's involvement to a hush.

Mike groaned, exhausted and frustrated by everything going on around him. The situation with El and the uncertainty there, the balancing act with his mom, and his furtive attempts at minimizing and concealing how upset he really was. His eyes finally filled with tears and he growled angrily into the receiver, ducking his head down to try and be less noticeable.

"Michael," Karen's tone was completely different now. "Michael, what's wrong? Please talk to me," Her voice was soft and warm but that somehow made Mike feel worse. He didn't *want* to fall apart, he didn't *want* to have this conversation.

"Our friend El," Mike replied brusquely. "We - they found her this morning and sh-she's in the hospital and we don't know what's going on but she's in a coma and now someone named Becky is here -"

Dustin and Lucas watched as Mike rambled and Dustin tried to pat his friend sympathetically on the shoulder but Mike shook him off.

"Mike, slow down," Karen said, her voice firm but gentle. "Where are you?"

Mike inhaled deeply, finding a bit of stability before answering. "Clarksville General Hospital,"

"Okay," Karen said calmly and the steady rhythm of her voice helped Mike to calm down as well. "Who's there with you?"

"The Chief's with us," Mike replied as he exhaled.

"Will and his mom and Jonathan are on their way," Lucas whispered,

interjecting.

"And Will's on his way with his mom and Jonathan," Mike repeated.

"Okay," Karen said, pausing as she thought. "I can probably get up there in about 30 minutes,"

"No, Mom, don't," Mike insisted. "Please. We're probably going to be leaving in a little while anyway. The Chief said we couldn't stay very long," He frowned. "I can ride back with him or Mrs. Byers,"

"Are you sure?" His mom asked as baby Holly started hollering in the background.

"Yeah," Mike nodded definitively, though she couldn't see. "I'm sure,"

"Okay, well," Karen hesitated. "We can talk more when you get home. I'm here for you, Mike,"

"I know..." Mike replied automatically.

"Guess we do need to call our parents after all," Lucas said after Mike hung up.

"Yeah, sorry guys," Mike replied distantly as he stepped away from the phone. "I forgot she made up this rule about letting her know when I wasn't gonna be home after Will came back. She was really freaked out,"

"Don't worry about it, dude," Dustin waved him off as Lucas retrieved a quarter from the side pocket of his backpack and slipped it into the payphone.

Mike glanced in the direction they'd come. "I'm gonna go back and see El," He said, walking away immediately.

"We'll catch up to you," Lucas called after him as he waited for someone to pick up at his house.

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Hopper was back outside with Becky smoking another cigarette when

Joyce and the boys arrived at the hospital. The parking lot was starting to become less congested so they found a spot with relative ease and approached the pair outside of the sliding glass doors.

Joyce couldn't say she was surprised to see Becky there. She'd had a feeling that Hopper brought El to Clarksville, the small town in which the Ives' lived, for this particular reason. How good of an idea that would be, however, she wasn't sure.

Hopper raised an eyebrow at the woman as she approached the building, her two sons in tow.

"I guess the boys told you?" Hopper surmised.

"Yeah," Joyce said, her eyes wide and alert. "Can I - Can I talk to you, Hop?" She glanced at Becky and the curly-haired woman took the hint.

Becky rubbed her half-finished cigarette out against the brick wall behind her, returning it to the pack in her purse. "I'm gonna check out the vending machine," She jerked a thumb at the doors before walking away.

"Mom, we're gonna -" Jonathan started but Joyce waved them off.

"Go, go," She said. "I'll be in soon,"

Once they were alone, Hopper grinned at the petite woman standing in front of him. "How's it goin', Joyce?"

"El is *here*?" She said, cutting to the chase. "And Becky -"

"Look, I know what you're gonna say," Hopper cut her off. "It was a risk but what'd be *more* of a risk is not having a solid story for this girl. Where's she supposed to go after this? Calling CPS would have this girl on a one-way train back to that god-forsaken lab. *I* don't have the space for a kid and *you've* got a full house," He added, catching the look on Joyce's face as she was about to protest. "Besides, this is her real family, Joyce. You said it yourself - this woman, Becky's sister, has been looking for her daughter for 12 years," He paused, studying Joyce's face as her face softened with resignation. "Hell, who knows if she'll even know who the hell El is

but they deserve to know she *exists*, right?"

After a brief pause, Joyce sighed. "You're right," She shrugged her shoulders, then crossed her arms. "But how do you know you can trust her?"

"Joyce, c'mon," Hopper sighed. "She's been takin' care of her sister for god knows how long and the government is the reason she's even in this mess in the first place. I can't see her teaming up with them," He said solemnly. "You should've seen her face when she saw El earlier,"

Joyce pursed her lips. "I just..." She glanced down, then back up at Hopper. "She deserves a *good* home, you know?" She said emphatically. "She needs to be *loved* and *taken care of*,"

"And she will be," Hopper said, trying to reassure her but his patience obviously wearing a little thin. He was exhausted from the day's adventures, too. "But nobody's even talked about where El's going after this yet. She's gonna in the hospital for a while and we can't go putting the cart before the horse, alright?"

"How is she, by the way?" Joyce asked, a welcome change of topic, though the topic itself was not the most enjoyable. "Will said she was in a *coma*?"

"Medically-induced," Hopper clarified. "She had swelling in her brain," He cast a pointed look at her and Joyce got the message. It obviously had to do with her powers somehow. "So they put her in it to try and let everything settle down. Aside from that, she's basically in the same boat Will was in, just a bit worse,"

"How could she survive in that place?" Joyce wondered aloud, only half-expecting an answer. "Will... He-he almost *died* down there after a *week*... A-And she was in there a *month*?"

Hopper shrugged. "I dunno," He said, flicking his cigarette butt across the parking lot. "But it wouldn't be the first time I came across something that didn't make sense. Not after the past month and a half," He started walking toward the ER entrance and Joyce followed closely behind.

.....

El's room was crowded with all four boys, Jonathan, Joyce, Hopper, and Becky spread out around the perimeter. When Joyce had come in with Hopper, she'd spent a few minutes holding El's hand and running a gentle hand over the girl's short hair as she whispered incoherently to her unconscious form. Becky had been quiet for the most part and the boys chatted here and there. Mike sat quiet and steadfast at El's bedside, having pulled a chair close to the edge, and hadn't let go of her hand since he'd returned to the room.

A knock jolted everyone from the silence.

"Good afternoon, everyone," A doctor in a white coat with a stethoscope hanging from around his neck walked in. He had thin wire-framed glasses and he was starting to go bald but what he lacked in hair, he made up for in a well-kept beard that only had small patches of grey throughout the otherwise dark brown mass. A nurse with dark hair pulled back into a tight bun came in a moment later. "I don't believe I've met all of you but I'm Dr. Kramer. I'm the attending on Jane's case," He shot a smile around the room as he walked up to El's bed, looking over the clipboard in his hand. "Alright, let's see," He gave the clipboard to the nurse and pulled a device shaped like a pen out of his pocket. As he lifted El's eyelids, quickly flashing light from the pen across both eyes, the nurse took notes on the clipboard. "Good response," He murmured as he checked her vitals and the EEG printout, everyone's eyes following him all the while.

"Okay," Dr. Kramer finally stood up straight, returning his stethoscope to his neck after having checked El's heart and lungs against the monitor's readings. "She's stable. I'd like to monitor her overnight to see how her the swelling in her brain goes down. Her readings look good but she isn't out of the woods yet," He said, glancing back and forth between El and all of her visitors periodically. "We're warming her up slowly with a heated IV and heating blankets but she was moderately hypothermic which always comes with risks. From this point forward, we're keeping an eye out for pneumonia and monitoring her brain activity to ensure that the swelling goes down and there is no permanent damage,"

"When will she wake up?" Mike ventured the question, his voice cracking from a combination of disuse and puberty.

"We'll see how she does overnight but if all goes well, we can start to wake her up sometime within the next couple of days," Dr. Kramer answered with a soft smile. "We do have an overnight visitor limit of two people; were any of you intending to stay the night?"

"I am," Hopper said immediately.

"I can, too," Mike offered but Hopper immediately shot him down.

"Nuh uh. You're goin' home,"

"What?" Mike protested. "Why? That-"

"I'd like to stay," Becky spoke up, her voice catching everyone off guard.

"There ya go," Hopper shrugged. "Becky and I will stay with her overnight,"

"That isn't fair!" Mike started to argue but Hopper cut him off.

"*The rest of you-*" He said, looking pointedly at Mike. "-can come back and visit her tomorrow. I'll come pick you up myself, how's that?"

Mike grumbled his dissent but didn't argue any further. They spent another twenty minutes chatting amongst themselves and visiting with El before Hopper drove Mike, Dustin, and Lucas home. Becky left to check in with the neighbor who was taking care of her sister while she was gone and Joyce stayed behind with Jonathan and Will to visit with El a little longer.

Joyce gently caressed the side of El's face, this girl who had saved her son's life and escaped unimaginable horrors. Her heart ached thinking about everything El had gone through, what she knew of it at least, and she hoped and prayed for the chance that this amazing young girl would get to live a normal, happy life.

.....

Mike was quiet on the drive home. Lucas and Dustin were seated in the back and had fallen asleep ten minutes into the drive, their heads lolled back against the seats. Hopper didn't try to talk to Mike and he was thankful for that. He didn't want to admit it but he knew he couldn't stay overnight with El. Even though they had one more day left of break before school picked up again, his mom would have a conniption if he didn't come home today like he'd promised.

The fact that the doctors didn't anticipate her waking up tonight gave him the slightest hint of relief that she wouldn't wake up tonight and he'd be stuck home missing it. If the doctors were in control of when she woke up, then maybe they could time it so he could be there with her.

It all felt too surreal. Maybe it was the fact that they'd been up since the crack of dawn and he'd barely gotten any sleep the night before but the warmth of the car and the steady lull of the engine were making Mike drowsy. His adrenaline was rapidly wearing off and now he just wanted to be with El. He wanted her to be okay, to wake up and to know for sure that she was safe.

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"I'm going crazy, I'm losing sleep. I'm in too far, I'm in way too deep over you. You'll always be the one. You were the first, you'll be the last..."

14. Never Tear Us Apart

[A/N: Hey y'all! I hope everyone is enjoying themselves so far. We're only at the tip of the iceberg but I think you guys will be happy with this chapter ;)]

As always, if you like what you're reading, please favorite/follow/review and let me know!

Toodles :)]

Chapter 14: Never Tear Us Apart (by INXS)

"We could live for a thousand years but if I hurt you, I'd make wine from your tears. I told you that we could fly 'cause we all have wings but some of us don't know why..."

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The middle school had been closed down for a few weeks back in November due to all of the structural damage that needed to be repaired and the massive clean-up of so many government agents' bodies. Even after re-opening just before Christmas break, the signs of destruction had still been there. Paint cans, ladders, sawdust, and maintenance personnel working in the hallways were a constant reminder that something big had happened in that small school. On their first day back after winter break, the school was almost back to normal sans a few areas sectioned off by caution tape but anyone who'd been there on that eventful night could still vividly see and remember the broken cement blocks from the Demogorgon's entrance, the trails of blood seeping across the linoleum, and the screeches and cries of the monster and its victims.

Falling back into routine with school did little to subdue Mike's nervous energy surrounding El's condition. It was Tuesday and classes had resumed as usual but Mike's mind was elsewhere. He'd sat through Mr. Clarke's class in the morning but could barely remember what had happened. They'd done some group work and he'd had to move his desk at one point but he only vaguely remembered talking about different types of rocks and volcanoes. He'd biked to school

with Lucas, Dustin, and Will and had idly chatted with them along the way but ever since first period, he'd been uncharacteristically quiet, lost in his own head. The frantic tapping of his foot and the nervous fidgeting of his hands throughout the day were the only indicators he hadn't gone completely catatonic.

They were going to start to wean El off the drugs that were keeping her comatose today. Her brain swelling had gone down considerably and they didn't want to keep her under any longer than necessary. Dr. Kramer had said they wouldn't begin the weaning process until mid-afternoon which left just enough time for them to get out of school and get back up to Clarksville right away in the hopes of being there when she woke up. Jonathan was going to pick them all up after school so all Mike could think about was how slowly time seemed to be passing and how excited yet nervous he was to finally get to see and talk to El again. Like, *really* talk to her. He hadn't even had any of those weird dreams with her since they found her and he wondered what that could mean. Was she unable to do it if *she* was unconscious? Did it mean her brain was scrambled and she wouldn't even know who he was when she woke up? He tried not to let it bother him as much as it actually did.

Mike hadn't been able to glide through the day as easily as he'd hoped, however. Seventh period came with a welcome ringing of the bell and Mike rejoiced in the fact that there were only 50 more minutes left in the school day. As he sat down at his bench in the tech ed classroom, he eagerly watched the clock at the front of the room. The hands made their way methodically around the clock's face, steadily bringing him closer to 2:45 when he'd be able to meet back up with his friends and head up to the hospital.

They'd been working on making small picture frames out of plastic. Before the break, they'd started the process of bending the material with heat and molding it into the correct shape so that it could sit up on its own and someone could slide a picture in through the gap between each layer of the bended plastic. They'd had to measure everything precisely so as not to overuse materials and it'd been a time-consuming process with only two machines for bending the plastic being shared by 25 other students. It wasn't their most exciting project - Mike had much preferred creating the egg-crash

cart they'd worked on at the beginning of the school year - but he'd decided that he could use this little plastic frame to hold his very first picture of El. This livened him up throughout the remainder of the period and he'd worked diligently in perfecting the edges of the plastic, smoothing out stray pieces that were frayed from being cut.

As the class drew to a close, Mike was chatting animatedly with his table-mates about the progress of their frames. Almost everyone had finished with only a few people still at the back work tables putting the finishing touches on their projects in the last fifteen minutes of class. Mike admired his work and beamed with excitement at the thought of seeing El, taking a picture of or *with* her, and being able to put it in this frame. He'd spent weeks lamenting the fact that he never got a picture of El back in November and wasn't sure if he'd ever see her again so he wanted to make sure he fixed that right away.

Their teacher, Ms. Burns, was an intimidating woman with long, curly, dark red hair and she rode to school every day on a motorcycle which explained the consistent theme of black leather in her wardrobe. As Ms. Burns rounded up and assisted the lingering students in the back, the rest of the class was able to leisurely wait at their benches at the front of the classroom. Mike was lost in thought, staring at his creation, when Troy came up behind him and plucked the frame from his grasp.

"Nice frame you got there," His voice dripped with malicious sarcasm and Mike whirled around, glaring at him.

"Give it back, Troy," Mike said assertively, his brow furrowed.

"Why?" Troy mocked. "So you can put a picture of your ugly frog-face in it?"

Mike sighed in exasperation, rolling his eyes. The other students around them were watching but no one said or did anything.

"Here," Troy said, pretending to offer the frame to Mike but as he paused to consider taking it, Troy quickly whipped the frame at Mike's face, a remaining sharp edge catching Mike across the cheek, before pulling it back out of Mike's grasp. Mike growled as a long pink scratch formed across his pale cheek and little pinpricks of blood

formed along the line. He wiped at his cheek and scowled.

"Ooooooooooh," Several students around them taunted in a low tone, awaiting some sort of entertaining altercation.

"Cut it out, Troy," Mike said in a low voice, his patience wearing considerably thin.

"Or *what?*" Troy said, getting in Mike's face and his hot breath made Mike want to gag. "What are you gonna do without your freakazoid girlfriend to protect you?" He added, matching Mike's low tone with a menacing grin and several students around them snickered.

"Shut up," Mike growled, swiping at the frame but missing as Troy pulled it away again.

"Did she run away when she realized how much of a frog-faced *loser* you are?" Troy taunted with mock sympathy, his grin widening.

"*Shut up!*" Mike yelled, standing up. Their faces were entirely too close and Mike met Troy with a fierce gaze of his own.

"Aww," Troy mocked. "Looks like someone got his feelings hurt," He smirked as Mike once again tried to snatch the frame out of Troy's hand to no avail. At this point, the teacher had stepped out of the room with another student and the bully took full advantage of the temporary lack of supervision as he darted to the back of the classroom.

"*What the hell, Troy?!*" Mike called as he chased the boy to one of the machines in the back where he held the frame against the heat and Mike watched in horror as the plastic began to melt. "Stop it!" He demanded but the damage was done. Troy casually tossed the frame back to Mike who caught the still-hot edge in his hands. Mike yelped in pain, dropping the half-melted frame to the ground as Troy doubled over with laughter.

Mike crouched to the ground to pick up his mutilated frame as Troy scurried back to his bench at the front and Ms. Burns stepped back into the classroom.

"Mr. Wheeler, to your seat," She ordered and Mike stood up,

dejectedly trudging back to his own bench as his table-mates watched him with sympathetic expressions. He plopped back down on his cold metal stool and examined the damage to his frame. It wouldn't stand up on its own anymore when he placed it on the tabletop, instead falling over to one side as it favored the melted edge. The two plastic pieces that left just enough space to slip a photo inside were now fused together and the frame was utterly useless at this point. Mike glared at the frame, trying to keep himself together just long enough to make it out of school. As angry as he was, the only thing that could make matters worse would be getting in trouble and missing the chance to see El.

As the final bell rang and the student excitedly filed out of the classroom, Mike stuffed his disfigured frame into his backpack and tossed the bag over his shoulder.

"Who shit in *your* coffee?" Dustin asked as Mike stomped down the hall toward him and his other two friends, an unconscious glare still present on his face.

"I don't wanna talk about it," Mike declared as he brushed past his friends, leading the way to the main entrance of the school.

"I bet it was Troy," Will surmised gently.

"Man, I hate that asshole," Lucas grumbled, shaking his head. "What'd he do?"

"I said I *don't* wanna talk about it!" Mike repeated vehemently as he pushed open the doors and the boys stepped outside in search of Jonathan's car.

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Throughout much of the 30 minute car ride, Mike had been silently fuming but the duration of the trip and the anticipation of seeing El were enough to slowly work him out of his funk. By the time they made it to the hospital, Mike's nervous energy had returned and while he could carry on idle chit-chat with his friends, his mind was focused primarily on thoughts of El. The four boys, along with Jonathan, sat around in El's room, waiting and watching her with

anticipation. Their eyes were peeled for any minute sign of movement or wakefulness from the frail girl but boredom from sitting around doing nothing was all but driving them stir-crazy.

Hopper and Becky were already at the hospital when the boys arrived. Joyce had said she'd like to come but she wouldn't be able to get there until later that evening after her shift ended at the store.

"You know," Becky said as she leaned against a wall as Hopper poured himself a cup of coffee from a pot in the cafe. They'd spent the past half hour with El so once the boys had gotten there, they'd opted for a coffee break. "I've been thinkin'..." She trailed off and Hopper lifted a sideways glance to her.

"Yeah?"

"Say she wakes up and everything's fine and all that... then what?" Becky wondered aloud. "Where's she go?"

Hopper pursed his lips and shrugged. "Haven't crossed that bridge," He'd had a feeling this conversation would come up, given Becky's interest in El since New Years, and had been hopeful it would from the get go.

"I mean..." Becky went on thoughtfully. "She's my *niece*, right?" Her gaze wandered out to the tables in the middle of the cafeteria. "And Terry's daughter,"

"Mmhmm," Hopper nodded, a keen suspicion of where this was going. "You think you wanna take her in?"

Becky sighed. "I don't know," She ran a hand through her messy waves. "I wouldn't feel right if I didn't but I... I mean, I don't even know this girl. She doesn't know me. What do I even *say* to her?" Becky rambled, silently pining for a cigarette to calm herself at this point. "And how the *hell* do I introduce her to Terry? My sister thinks her baby is still a *baby*,"

Hopper sighed thoughtfully as he lifted the lidded cup of coffee to his lips. "One day at a time," He said before taking a sip.

"And what the hell do I do about her papers?" Becky continued. "No

birth certificate, no social security number... it's like she doesn't even exist,"

Hopper furrowed his brow in thought. "I might be able to find a way around that,"

Becky quirked an eyebrow. "How's that?"

"I've got a friend down at the SSA that owes me one," Hopper said surreptitiously. "Just let me look into it,"

"Okay..." Becky paused, her mind whirring with problems and solutions and hypotheticals. Never had she expected to find herself in a situation like this. She'd spent the past five years of her life caring for her older sister, convinced that she'd simply taken too many drugs during her college years and as a result, had completely lost her mind. In truth, she'd resented her sister quite a bit for the burden it'd put on her. They were all they had in the world, though. Their father had walked out on them when Becky was a baby and their mother died of a stroke three years ago. To think that maybe they had more family than she'd known was bewildering to say the least. "What happens if I don't take her?" Becky asked as she and Hopper sat down at a small metal table nearby.

Hopper shrugged. "You're her only real family," He said simply, bringing his styrofoam cup up to his lips and taking another sip. "And CPS can't get involved. That's a surefire way to get her back to the lab," He said plainly, adding, "Or worse,"

Becky nodded solemnly, looking down at the slotted metal table in front of her. Hopper had explained that much of Terry's accusations had been true. The government had been holding El for all these years, conducting experiments on her in the hope of using her as some type of weapon. She still had her doubts that this young girl actually had *powers* like they were saying - that had to be some sort of exaggeration. But the kidnapping was obviously true and the thought of it turned her stomach. All her life, their mother had drilled the idea into her and Terry's heads that family was everything. You didn't turn your back on them, you didn't run away, and you did everything in your power to make sure they were taken care of. That's why she couldn't put Terry in a hospital like so many of her

friends had encouraged her to do. She'd had to drop out of her own college program to take care of Terry when their mom died. Working full-time, plus the money from their mom's life insurance policy, kept them afloat and at least paid for a day nurse to watch Terry when Becky went to work. As much as it exhausted and stressed her, she couldn't abandon her sister so could she really turn her back on her niece? As if she wasn't already overwhelmed enough 99% of the time...

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"When is she gonna *wake up*?" Dustin groaned, wondering aloud.

"It's been three *hours*," Lucas bemoaned. "The sun's already gone down,"

"She could wake up at any second, guys," Mike said emphatically from his place next to El's bedside. They'd pulled additional chairs into the room so each of them had a seat around the perimeter with Mike's place by El as he held her hand.

"Well, it's obviously not gonna be *this* second so I'm going on a snack break," Dustin stood up from the chair he'd been lounging in at the end of El's bed. The pain of boredom was nearly driving him crazy and he needed to stretch his legs and *do* something.

"I'll come with you," Lucas said, following his friend out the door.

"Guys, c'mon!" Mike rebuked. "She's gonna wake up soon,"

Will silently stood up and started walking to the door.

"You too, Will?" Mike said in a disappointed tone.

"I've um..." Will's voice was strained and tight and Mike recognized the tinge of green on his friend's face. "I've just gotta use the bathroom,"

Darting a glance back and forth between El and Will, Mike quickly scrambled around the edge of the bed and followed his friend into the hall.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked Will once they were out of the room.

"Yeah," Will nodded, his stomach twisting in his gut. "I should be. I'm just gonna run to the bathroom," He jerked a thumb at the men's room across the hall and Mike watched as his friend darted away. Maybe he should go in and make sure Will was alright. He didn't think there was any way he could *prevent* Will from slipping back into the Upside Down but it'd probably be best to keep an eye on him. Besides, he could use a pee break and stepping away from El for a couple minutes couldn't hurt. They *had* been waiting for hours, after all.

Will pushed his way into a stall and the sound of his retching made Mike wince.

"Do you need anything?" Mike asked as he stood outside the stall door, looking up to the ceiling and trying to keep his sympathy nausea at bay.

"Uh-uh," Will managed as he began to cough violently and a splash into the toilet signaled the apparent end of his efforts. The sound of the toilet flushing drowned out Will's soft, miserable groan and Mike stepped aside when Will emerged from the stall.

"Hey, you didn't disappear this time," Mike noted gleefully and his friend forced a smile, his eyes still dull with sickness.

"Yeah," Will nodded meekly as he walked up to the sinks. "Cool,"

Mike quickly walked over to the urinals, satisfied that his friend was okay and eager to get back into the hospital room.

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Everything was blurry, white, and far too bright for her liking. The first thing she noticed as her vision came into focus was the corner of a table. It was made of that fake wood with an oak stain and there was a plastic cup of water sitting on top next to a fat, teal-colored lamp. As her tunnel vision gradually lessened, she noted several chairs situated around her. She was in a bed, she knew that much, and the heavy, scratchy feeling against her legs was coming from the

overly starched white sheets and blanket over her. Turning her head to the side, there were tubes and bags with liquid dripping inside as well as several machines and monitors. She stared at them vacantly, quizzically, trying to make out what they were for as she slowly registered more and more of her surroundings.

She felt dizzy and her arms and legs were weak. She tried to lift her head but the effort seemed to take an enormous amount of energy. As wakefulness washed over her, she noticed a stinging, pinprick sensation in her arm and looked down. A thin tube was sticking out of the inside of her elbow and another was coming out of the top of her hand. In that moment, she recognized the familiar feeling of adhesive stickers and wires on her head and after blinking a few times, registered the sight of a familiar machine near her bedside. She watched in paralyzed horror as the needle darted up and down, drawing lines and waves on a long sheet of paper that had already reached the floor and doubled over on itself.

No. She tried to speak but nothing came out right away. "N-No," Her voice cracked as panic began to set in. Her heartbeat quickened and her chest felt tight. This couldn't be happening. She couldn't be back there. She'd gotten out! How did this happen?

"No!" She cried, her voice still brittle as tears flooded her eyes and her panic heightened. She felt little tubes in her nose and yanked them out, tossing the tubing aside. "NO!" She began to scream, gradually finding her voice.

A woman in floral print scrubs ran into the room, yelling to others in the hallway but El wasn't paying attention. She had to get out. She had to escape. She couldn't go back. She couldn't stay in this place. Several men in white lab coats rushed into the room and El started to scream louder.

"NO! NO!" She cried, sitting up and ripping the tubes out of her arms, ignoring the burning sensation they left and the droplets of blood that escaped the tiny holes in her arm and hand. One of the monitors by her bed was beeping out of control and she just wanted everything to stop.

"Mike!" She called out desperately, her voice punctuated with distress

as she cried. "No!" She yelled into the face of a man who tried to gently push her back against the pillows. "*MIKE! Mike!*" She was exhausted, using every ounce of her energy in her fight against these strange people. She noticed the gown she was wearing and this only fueled her desperate fight even more. She shoved against the doctors and nurses attempting to restrain her, crying and yelling all the while. "*Mike!*"

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"Do you hear that?" Mike asked as he ripped a paper towel from the dispenser by the sink, drying his hands.

"Someone's yelling?" Will guessed but Mike was already yanking the bathroom door open and rushing out.

Down the hall, he could immediately recognize El's voice. "She's awake!" He yelled as he ran, closing the distance between himself and the room door as Will jogged closely behind him.

Stopping abruptly in the doorway, Mike braced himself against each side of it with both hands as he caught his breath. "I'm here!" He yelled over the commotion happening in the room. "El!"

The sound of his voice pulled El's attention away from her struggle and when they made eye contact, it was all Mike could do to keep his knees from buckling. She was awake. She was alive. And she knew who he was.

"El, it's okay!" He darted over to her, squeezing in between two nurses and grabbing El's hand. Her eyes were wide with terror as she looked around at the doctors and nurses standing over her. Seemingly satisfied with the way she was calming down, they lessened their grips on her but didn't step away. "You're in the hospital. It's okay. They're here to help you,"

"Help?" El's eyebrows stitched together with worry, her big brown eyes darting between Mike and the hospital staff.

"Yeah, El," Mike nodded reassuringly, rubbing her hand between both of his. "You were really sick and they made you better. You're safe,"

He smiled, his eyes brimming with tears of relief that he fought hard to blink away.

"P-Promise?" She stammered, keeping a wary eye on the men in white lab coats on her opposite side.

"I *promise*," Mike said emphatically, shaking her hand as he did so. "We're all here - Dustin and Lucas and -"

"Will," El said softly, noticing the smaller boy behind Mike.

"Hi," Will waved awkwardly, stepping forward at the mention of his name. "Nice to meet you," he said, adding, "Again,"

El looked back and forth between Mike and Will as she gradually settled down.

"Sweetheart," one of the nurses said gently, pulling El's reluctant attention. "Let's get your arm cleaned up, okay? Then we've gotta hook you back up so we can watch your heart and your breathing, okay?"

El looked to Mike and he recognized her confused, concerned expression. "The monitors and tubes - that's how they make sure you're breathing and everything is working the way it's supposed to. If something goes wrong and you need help, the monitors let them know,"

El pursed her lips, uncertain and afraid but she trusted Mike. She looked up at the nurse who was smiling warmly and gave a tentative nod. El watched as she retrieved some gauze and alcohol pads from a drawer and replaced Mike at her side momentarily, efficiently cleaning up the dried bloody mess inside El's elbow.

"I've got it from here," The nurse said to the other doctors and nurses surrounding them and El watched with relief as they filed out of the room. "Don't you worry, honey," She said as she held a gauze pad against El's original injection site before replacing it with fresh gauze and taping it down. "My name's Denise and we're taking good care of you,"

El watched warily as Denise discarded the old tubing and walked

back around to the other side of her bed, pulling fresh ones out of a drawer. Mike resumed his place at El's side, cradling her hand in his.

"Holy shit, she's awake!" Dustin's loud voice echoed in the room as he and Lucas appeared in the doorway carrying bags of chips and donuts.

"Give her some space, guys," Denise said gently as she wiped an alcohol pad against the inside of El's other elbow. El watched the woman as she prepared the needle and catheter. Dustin and Lucas dropped their snacks down on their respective chairs and stood by watching.

El shot a worried glance at Mike who squeezed her hand. "It's okay. It's just a needle. I've gotten a million of them before and it only hurts for a second. Like a pinch," El's gaze was fixed on the strange objects in the nurse's hand. "Just squeeze my hand, okay?" Mike said, drawing her attention back to him. "For as long as it hurts, just squeeze, okay El?"

El bit the inside of her lip before reluctantly nodding as the nurse tied a rubber tourniquet around her arm. She'd had needles before. The people at the lab always wanted blood from her and sometimes they injected her with weird liquids that made her feel funny before doing experiments. She'd never had anyone hold her hand through it, though. The lab people were rough, pulling on her skin and stabbing her. Sometimes a new person would take her blood and they'd miss the vein, then wiggle the needle around in an attempt to get it right which only hurt El more and left her with gigantic bruises in her arm.

"Here we go," Denise said, inserting the first needle and attaching the new tubing to it. El shut her eyes tightly and squeezed Mike's hand as the painful prick of the needle subsided and the nurse released the rubber tie around her arm.

"See?" Mike said after a second and El opened her eyes tentatively, looking down in fascination at the new tube coming out of her arm. "Not so bad, right?"

El pursed her lips and watched as the nurse attached another needle and tube to her hand.

"All done," Denise said in a sing-song voice, tossing the needles into a sharps container and the rest of the trash into their appropriate bins. "You did great, sweetheart," She said as she removed her gloves. "Get some rest, okay?" She directed her attention to the boys. "Don't get her riled up again, alright?"

"We won't," Dustin and Lucas replied automatically before exchanging confused looks. They hadn't witnessed El's freak-out.

El sighed heavily once the nurse was gone, clinging tightly to Mike's hand as she relaxed back into her pillow. Mike took a seat in the chair by the bed, scooting close and giving El more of his arm to hold onto.

"I can't believe you're really back," Lucas said softly and El looked up, meeting his gaze.

"We've got a *lot* to catch you up on," Dustin added, grinning, and El matched his smile with a more demure one of her own.

"Friends," El murmured peacefully, turning on her side and resting her head against Mike's forearm as she kept his hand tightly in her grasp. Mike fought the blush that crept up his neck and ignored his friends' smirks. Despite everything that had happened, the only thing that mattered right now was that El was finally back and she was okay.

.....

"I was standing, you were there. Two worlds collided, and they could never tear us apart..."

[A/N: El is awake! :D]

15. When I See You Smile

[A/N: So I'm on a wee big of a roll and I got another chapter done today lol I wasn't going to post QUITE yet but I thought you guys deserved some fluff so I'm uploading now :) Enjoy!]

Chapter 15: When I See You Smile (by Bad English)

"Sometimes I wonder how I'd ever make it through... Through this world without having you. I just wouldn't have a clue 'cause sometimes it seems like this world's closing in on me. And there's no way of breaking free, and then I see you reach for me..."

.....

"Dude, I can't believe you're back," Dustin said animatedly, his excitement brimming. "You're never gonna believe -"

"We went *into the Upside Down* to find you!" Lucas cut him off, his own enthusiasm evident in the wide smile on his face. "It was crazy,"

"You were like, *totally* out cold," Dustin added.

Lucas said bluntly, "I thought you were gonna die,"

"Lucas!" Mike scolded with an incredulous expression.

"But she *didn't!*" Lucas continued, innocently shaking his head and gesturing with open palms.

"They had to do CPR to bring you back," Will chimed in.

"Yeah," Dustin nodded, wiggling his eyebrows. "And Mike gave you mouth-to-mouth,"

"Like the cafeteria?" El asked innocently, her eyes wide with curiosity as she looked around at the faces surrounding her.

"No!" Mike coughed, his face flushing beat-red. "Um, n-not like that. I, uh..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, *wait a minute*," An ever-widening grin stretched across Dustin's face and his eyes twinkled at the scene in front of him. Lucas pursed his lips, his eyebrows lifting in an amused expression as Will watched. He had missed too much to understand what was so interesting about El's statement. "*Whaaaat?*" Dustin pressed.

"Mouth-to-mouth," El formed the words carefully, touching her lips with her fingers and looking at Mike whose eyes had seemingly grown to twice their normal size. "In the school?"

"Okay, I uh, think that's enough, El," Mike interrupted her, his ears and cheeks hot with embarrassment.

"But it's getting so *good*," Lucas pretended to whine.

"Yeah, Mike," Dustin added playfully, resting his chin in his hand. "What did we miss in the cafeteria?"

"*Nothing, okay?!*" He replied adamantly and his voice squeaked, causing Dustin and Lucas to erupt into laughter as El looked on, confused as ever. "Can we talk about something else, *please?*"

"Sure, Mike," Dustin obliged, still chuckling.

The boys spent the next half hour with El as it'd already gotten quite late into the evening by the time she'd woken up. They'd eventually gotten to chatting about Christmas and Thanksgiving and assured her that she'd learn all about the different holidays.

"Maybe when you get out of here, we can go see the Christmas lights around town," Mike suggested.

El nodded enthusiastically, a small smile stretched across her face.

"Some of them might already be taken down though," Mike said in a disappointed tone, realizing how late in the season it was getting to be. "But we can try,"

"Yeah, but next year you'll get all kinds of presents," Dustin added cheerily.

"Presents?" El inquired curiously as a cough crept its way up her

throat.

"Yeah, you know," Lucas chimed in. "Gifts. From your friends and family,"

"People give you stuff at Christmas," Mike explained. "And on your birthday and sometimes Hanukkah too, I guess if you're Jewish,"

El just stared, overwhelmed by this influx of information. "Birthday?"

"Does she not know her birthday?" Lucas looked around the circle of boys.

"It's the day you were born," Will offered but El still looked confused and a little upset as she looked away.

"Don't worry, El," Mike said, grabbing her attention. "Everyone has a birthday," He paused thoughtfully. "What if we say yours is November 7th? The day we found you?"

El's face brightened at that and she nodded vigorously.

"Okay, great," Mike said, pleased with the decision. "So next November, we'll celebrate your birthday,"

"Alright, you guys," Jonathan said as he entered the hospital room after a bathroom break. "We've gotta head home. It's getting late and I promised Mom I'd get you guys home by 9,"

El frowned, her eyes widening with concern.

"Don't worry, they'll be back," Jonathan noticed her expression and calmly reassured the young girl with a smile. "And my mom is here now so she'll probably be in in a few minutes to see you,"

"Yeah, we can come back tomorrow after school," Mike said quickly.

"Yeah," Will agreed, turning to his brother, "You can bring us back, right?"

"Well, I've gotta work tomorrow," Jonathan said regretfully. "But maybe the chief could bring you guys up. You should ask him,"

"We'll find a way," Mike said assuredly. "We promise. Right guys?" He turned to his friends and they all nodded their agreement.

"Definitely," Dustin added for good measure.

Lucas nodded, "Yup,"

"I think Hopper is gonna stick around for a while," Jonathan said. "Becky went home already,"

"Okay, well," Mike said, unsure of what to do with his hands. Since El had calmed down, he'd been fidgeting throughout their visit, uncomfortably hyper-aware of how long he'd been holding her hand earlier. "We'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

As the boys said their goodbyes to El, Mike hovered nearby, hoping to catch her alone if only for a split second.

El and Mike watched the three of them walk out and El turned to Mike expectantly.

"Hey El?"

"Yes?" She said in that small, soft tone of hers that sent weird fluttering sensations up and down Mike's arms.

He struggled to make eye contact, looking down at the sheet on her mattress as he fiddled with a loose thread. Faced with the opportunity to speak with her alone for the first time since she'd been awake, he'd suddenly lost all his nerve. "I um..." He began, opting for a different subject instead. "I wish I could stay," He said quietly, bravely lifting his gaze to meet hers.

A small smile touched the corners of her lips. "Me too," She said, never breaking eye contact with him, though he frequently darted his eyes down and around the room, then back to her. "Jonathan *promised*," She said gently, looking toward the hallway where Jonathan was speaking to Will while Dustin and Lucas chatted animatedly.

"Yeah um..." Mike stammered, following her gaze then looking back down at his hands as he fidgeted with that loose thread again. She'd

perfectly segued into what he'd wanted to talk to her about. "Speaking of promises..." He inhaled deeply, exhaling through his nostrils as he tapped his fingers against the bed rail. El watched his nervousness with curiosity. "I-I um, I'm really sorry... about missing the Snowball,"

El frowned, looking down at her lap. "Me too,"

Now what? Mike wasn't sure what to say in response and everything he thought of seemed stupid but he felt like even more of an idiot standing there saying nothing. "Uh," He began. "Maybe we could go next time," *Lame.*

But El smiled and nodded and Mike felt a warm sensation creep into his chest. "O-Okay, great," He grinned sheepishly, avoiding El's intense, magnetic gaze. Feeling a little brave, Mike added, "I um, I missed you... after the whole Demogorgon thing..."

El quirked her head to the side, eyeing him. "Demogorgon?"

Mike looked up at that. "Yeah," He said, frowning. "You killed the Demogorgon and that's when you disappeared... don't you remember?"

She stared at him, shaking her head and Mike's pulse quickened.

"So... you don't remember the Demogorgon coming after us?" Mike asked. "At the school?"

El pursed her lips and gave a small shake of her head.

"Wow..." Mike pushed himself off the rail as his mind whirled. If she didn't remember that, what else didn't she remember?

"Bad?" El looked up to him, her eyebrows stitched together and he could tell she was either worried or upset.

"Oh, uh," He stumbled over his words. He didn't want her to be upset. "No, it's fine," He shook his head. "Um, what's the last thing you *do* remember?"

El looked down, her hands clasped in her lap, then looked back up at

him. "Mouth-to-mouth," She said softly, touching her lips and reaching a hand up to touch his as well.

"Oh um, okay, wow," Mike blinked as his cheeks pinkened at her touch, his eyebrows raised. "What about -"

"Hey Wheeler!" Jonathan dipped his head into the room. "We've gotta get going,"

"Okay!" Mike said over his shoulder, then turned back to El. "Don't worry," He said, patting her on the shoulder in an attempt to assuage her concern. She looked at his hand on her, then looked back up to his eyes. "It's fine. You're fine. Just uh," He faltered, the rush of having to leave soon making it difficult to think. "We'll figure it out. Just um, relax and I'll be back tomorrow, okay?"

El wasn't thoroughly convinced that everything was okay but she offered a small nod nonetheless and one side of her mouth curved in the hint of a smile.

"And don't worry," Mike added, noticing her worried expression. "The people here, they're really nice and they'll take care of you. I'm sorry we can't stay..."

El pursed her lips and nodded bravely before offering Mike a sweet smile.

"Okay, great," Mike smiled back, retracting his arm that he realized had lingered on her shoulder a bit longer than necessary. He could feel his face getting hot. "Um, I've gotta go but I'll see you later, okay? Just uh, try and get some sleep,"

El nodded and watched him as he reluctantly backed away to the doorway.

"Night El," He said, a goofy grin unconsciously making its way to his face.

El's expression relaxed into the most natural smile she'd had all day. "Night Mike,"

.....

"She doesn't remember anything after the sensory deprivation tank," Mike whispered in the backseat to Lucas and Will, conveniently leaving out the part about their intimate moment in the cafeteria, as Jonathan drove the four of them home. "I think she just remembers finding you and that's it," He said, looking to Will. "She forgot everything after the lab men got to the school,"

"She's probably just got some amnesia from all the head crap she's been through," Lucas reasoned. "People come out of that all the time, don't they?"

"Maybe her memory will come back to her in a few days," Will offered hopefully and Mike leaned back in his seat, trying to let his friend's optimism replace his worry.

"I guess," He shrugged, looking out the window as they passed streetlight after streetlight leading up to his house.

As Mike made his way up to his front door after saying goodbye to his friends and thanking Jonathan for the ride, he ran through everything El might have forgotten in his mind. Running from the agents, saving them, fighting off the Demogorgon. Of all the places for her memory to cut off, though, it was their kiss in the cafeteria. He grinned a little at that. He had been embarrassed and nervous enough the *first* time he'd done it, he was glad that she hadn't completely forgotten it happened. But if he had to do it again, that also wouldn't have been so bad. Then he realized he was thinking about kissing her again and an uncomfortable blush sent heat up his neck and to his face and he tugged on the collar of his coat to try and let some cool air in before he opened the door and stepped inside.

.....

"Okay, how about another one?" Dustin said gleefully as he flipped through the pages of the joke book he'd gotten for Christmas.

El simply watched him with earnest as she sat cross-legged atop her bed. She didn't quite understand the humor in the book but she enjoyed the short stories and Dustin seemed to like telling them to her. Mike stood by the head of her bed, awkwardly going back and forth between leaning against the mattress and standing with his

hands on his hips. It'd been a few days since El had woken up and she was growing stronger quite quickly. As far as the doctors were concerned, all of her tests were checking out and she'd likely be able to go home in another week. She had a bit of a cough but they were monitoring her closely and the threat of pneumonia had thankfully passed.

Lucas and Will sat on opposing edges of the foot of El's bed, each dangling a leg over the side, as Dustin crowded close to El at the head. He kept the joke book in front of her as he read, despite the fact that most of the words were too advanced for her. She'd only been taught to read her name and a few small words - no one had ever taken the time to teach her more than that in the lab.

Dustin guffawed as he finally settled on a page, "O-Okay, this is a good one," He said, clearing his throat and pulling the book out of El's sight, holding it against his chest. "What do you call a bunch of chess players bragging about their games in a hotel lobby?"

El looked at him expectantly, one eyebrow raised.

Dustin waited a beat, then answered, "*Chess nuts boasting in an open foyer!*"

The boys erupted into chuckles as El sat, inquisitively looking from face to face. She smiled slightly, her doe eyes wide with confusion as her friends laughed.

"Man, that is so lame," Lucas shook his head, laughing.

"*Bite me*, Lucas," Dustin quipped.

Mike noticed El's blank expression and calmed himself enough to explain it to her.

"It's funny 'cause it's a play on words, you know?" He tried to break it down. "*Chess nuts*' are like, people who are really into the game and it's also a play on the word 'chestnut'. And '*boasting*' and '*foyer*' are -"

"Dude," Dustin scolded. "It's not funny if you have to explain it,"

"It's not *funny* if she doesn't *get it*," Mike countered.

"Bull," Dustin shook his head, looking at El. "You get it, right El?"

El looked at the curly-haired boy and smiled but her eyes gave her away.

"Yeah, she totally doesn't get it," Lucas laughed and Dustin rolled his eyes.

El's face fell slightly and Dustin chimed in, "Don't worry," He said assuredly, patting the girl on the shoulder. "We can fix that. You've just gotta hear more. Here, look -" He started flipping through the pages again but was interrupted by a knock on the open hospital room door.

"8 pm," Hopper said as he entered the room. "Time to go,"

"What?"

"No way,"

"Just a few more minutes,"

The boys complained but Hopper wasn't having any of it. "I told your parents you'd be home by 8:30. That means we leave *now*," He said emphatically. "You've been here damn-near every day this week, you'll see her again tomorrow,"

"Okay, well," Mike stalled for time. He wasn't sure what to say or do but he just wanted to be *here*. He wasn't ready to go home yet. "We'll come by again tomorrow after school, okay?"

"I'll bring the book again tomorrow," Dustin said cheerfully.

El nodded reluctantly as Mike managed an internal debate as to what to do from here. Should he grab her hand again? Pat her shoulder? Hug her? Every option seemed unreasonably terrifying.

"Okay um," Mike stammered, trying to forget that they weren't alone. "Bye, El," He said, quickly diving in and giving her an awkward hug that she didn't have time to reciprocate before he pulled away again. The added bonus of the pillows behind her that prevented him from enclosing his arms around her only made him feel like more of a

doofus.

He felt a small sense of relief when Dustin, Lucas, and Will all lined up to hug the girl goodbye as well, though their hugs carried much less weight than his did. He wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and pretended that his heart wasn't racing out of control in his chest.

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"There's nothing in this world that could ever do what a touch of your hand can do. It's like nothing that I ever knew..."

16. Hungry Like The Wolf

[A/N: Aaaaaaand I did it again XD. I'm trying to write as much as I can before school starts back up next week so please remember these moments when it's mid-semester and I haven't updated in weeks D:

Anywho! Let's get into some plot development, shall we? ;)]

Chapter 16: Hungry Like The Wolf (by Duran Duran)

"In touch with the ground, I'm on the hunt down I'm after you. Smell like I sound I'm lost in a crowd, and I'm hungry like the wolf..."

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After dropping Mike, Dustin and Lucas off at their respective houses, Hopper was dropping Will off at home when Joyce came out and met them in the driveway. She was still wearing her clerk's vest from the general store and had a cigarette dangling from her hand.

"Hey honey," She greeted her son with a hug before he darted inside, leaving the two adults outside.

Hopper stepped out of the driver's seat, leaning against his open door. "How's it goin', Joyce?"

"How's she doing today?" Joyce asked, taking a drag on her cigarette and shivering in the cold January air.

"She's good," Hopper said, noting Joyce's lack of a winter coat and chattering teeth. "Let's talk inside," He said, shutting his car door and walking into the small house with Joyce.

"I wanted to get up there today but after all the time I missed last month, Donald's had me on extended shifts and I can't really say no to the money," Joyce went on as they stepped over the threshold into the warmth. "There's still a lot of repairs we need-"

"Don't worry about it," Hopper said, resting a hand on her shoulder, instantly giving the high-strung woman pause. "She's doing fine and

whenever you have time, you can visit her again,"

Joyce sighed, leaning over the coffee table to put out her cigarette before sitting down on the couch. "So how long's she going to be in the hospital?" Joyce scooted over, patting the couch cushion and encouraging the chief to sit down.

"Looks like another week," Hopper said, settling into the couch cushion and removing his hat. "She's basically out of the woods but they wanna keep an eye on her to make sure her cough clears up,"

Joyce nodded along with his words. "Good, that's good," She said. "And they haven't asked about where she came from or how she ended up in that condition?"

Hopper shrugged. "I told them from the get-go that she'd been lost in the woods," He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees and clasping his hands together. "They didn't push it from there. The only thing they had questions about was her hair,"

"What'd you say?" Joyce asked, her intensely dark brown eyes focused on him.

"That she got gum in her hair," Hopper smirked and Joyce's face relaxed into a smile.

"That had to be a lot of gum," She quipped and he nodded.

"Yeah, well," He shrugged and the two sat in silence for a moment, smiling to themselves.

"So," Joyce began, matching Hopper's posture as she leaned forward and fiddled with her hands. "Is she going with Becky after all this is over?"

Hopper nodded thoughtfully. "It looks that way,"

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Hop?" Joyce wondered. "What if something goes wrong? What if the lab finds her anyway? Or worse, what if Becky sells her out to the lab now that she knows about her powers? We don't *know* her,"

"Joyce, we've been *over* this," Hopper said in a stern but patient voice that he'd used with her countless times before. "This is her *family*. And the lab is less likely to suspect that she's in some speck-of-dust-on-the-map town like Clarksville than here in the same town the lab's in,"

"But we could protect her," Joyce reasoned. "We don't know what her life's gonna be like up there,"

"Look," Hopper said, turning to Joyce and meeting her gaze. Her brows were stitched together with concern and her eyes were wide. As much as she frustrated him at times, he couldn't be anything less than gentle when she gave him that doe-like expression. "I've talked about this with Becky a *lot*," He said reassuringly. "Once El gets out of the hospital, she'll stay with the Ives' during the week,"

Joyce paused. "During the week?" She inquired. "So what happens on the weekend?"

"Maybe she'll come down here," Hopper shrugged. "We were talking about tutoring her and getting her ready for school. Weekends would be harder on Becky since she works the longest hours during that time and doesn't have a nurse for Terry for most of Friday and Saturday,"

"Oh," Joyce said, intrigued. "So who's going to tutor her? You?"

"Don't look so surprised," Hopper deadpanned and Joyce smiled.

"I'm not," She shook her head good-naturedly. "But at least that way we don't lose touch with her,"

"She's gonna be fine, Joyce," Hopper said, feeling like he was repeating himself for the millionth time since they'd found the young girl. "We've just gotta be careful about where she is and who she's with,"

Joyce looked down to her lap. "You know I would've gladly taken her in,"

"Joyce," Hopper said gently and the woman looked up at him. "You're having a hard enough time as it is with catching up on work and

repairs and taking care of the boys..."

"Are you saying I *couldn't* do it?" She eyed him defensively.

"Not at all," Hopper expertly dodged her accusation. "But you deserve some time to recover after everything you and the boys went through,"

Joyce sighed, not completely satisfied with his response but also recognizing the truth behind it. They were struggling right now and had fallen behind on the bills. November's electric bill had been through the roof and now the company was threatening to turn their power off since they were behind. But Joyce was too proud to admit that and instead had taken to working double-shifts in the hope of getting caught up as soon as she could.

"It's just," She said after a momentary pause. "She *saved my boy*, you know?" She shrugged, her voice wavering with emotion. "I want her to be okay,"

Hopper placed a hand on Joyce's shoulder and met her gaze. "And she will be," He said, in the most confident, reassuring tone he could muster.

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An uncomfortably familiar feeling stirred Will to waking late in the night. He rolled over in bed, pulling the covers away from his face to look at the clock on his bedside table.

2:35 A.M.

He groaned, pulling the cover back over his head in a reluctant, sleepy manner but the rumbling in his stomach was persistent and as a particularly strong wave of nausea washed over him, he jolted out of bed and ran for the bathroom. He'd barely thrown the door closed before collapsing in front of the toilet bowl, coughing and hacking into it as he felt the familiar sensation of something long and slimey making its way up his throat. He choked, sputtering as the creature was propelled out of his mouth and landed in the bowl with a splash. Will quickly yanked on the handle, watching as the slug thrashed

about in the miniature whirlpool as the toilet flushed. Panting, Will sat back against the wall and wiped his mouth on the long sleeve of his night shirt. Maybe he should tell someone about what was going on. It seemed like the vomiting was coming more and more frequently lately and the slugs were getting bigger, so much so that there were times that he wondered if he'd be able to get it out or if it would just choke him right then and there. Then again, he hadn't slipped into the Upside Down in several days, even after a vomiting episode which is usually when it happened. Maybe he actually was getting better, but gradually?

Once he felt like he was reasonably back to normal, Will stood up and washed his hands and face in the sink, drying himself with a hand towel on the bar on the wall. As he exited the bathroom, he wandered into the living room on a whim. He was wide-awake now and the light coming in from the lamppost outside cast a warm subtle glow over the living room. There was an old crocheted throw blanket hanging over the arm of the couch that his great-grandmother had made years ago and Will plucked it up, draping it over his shoulders as he settled into the couch. The Christmas tree was still up in the corner as his mom hadn't had time lately to take down all the ornaments and put them away but Will didn't mind. He got up and knelt beside the tree, crawling underneath to retrieve the cord and plug it into the outlet. The room lit up in a soft glow as the brightly colored lights twinkled against the dark pine needles. Some of the branches were dying but the sight of it was still comforting, still beautiful nonetheless.

Will returned to his place on the couch, laying down and propping his head up on a pillow as his gaze fell to the coffee table. An envelope marked "FINAL NOTICE" caught his eye and he reached out to grab it, rolling onto his back as he pulled out its contents.

As Will trained his eyes on the text in the dim light, his heart sank.

"Your overdue balance: \$427.36 as of January 1st, 1984. Power to your property will be turned off as of January 18th, 1984. To avoid disruption, please make a payment of \$300 by January 10th, 1984."

This wasn't the first time they'd had money problems. Will was well aware of the struggles his family had been through, especially after

his dad had left. Joyce did the best she could and Jonathan had taken a job at Hawkins pharmacy earlier that year in an effort to help out but they still barely made ends meet. There was usually just enough to cover bills and minor everyday expenses. As far as Will was aware, anything big that came about usually set them back quite a bit. He remembered last year when his mom's car had needed repairs and they got calls and threatening letters from bill collectors for months.

While it was nothing new to see a letter like this, it only served to affirm that now was not the time to bring up whatever was going on with him. He'd been dealing with it on his own for months anyway. He could handle the slugs and if and when he *did* slip into the Upside Down, he always came back.

Will returned the letter to the envelope and carefully placed it in the same spot he'd originally found it on the table, then crawled out of the throw blanket and walked over to the Christmas tree to turn the lights back off.

Yawning, Will decided to head back to bed and try and get some more sleep so he wouldn't be too tired for school the next day. As he walked around the wall dividing the living room and the hallway, his eyelids drooping with exhaustion, he wished it was Friday night instead of Thursday night so he could sleep in the following morning.

Suddenly, the hallway seemed to flash and the air was cold and thick with white particles drifting past. The floor was sticky with brown sludge and decaying vines wrapped themselves up and down the edges of the baseboards. Will screamed at the sight as it caught him off-guard and as quickly as he had flickered into the Upside Down, he flickered back.

"Will? Honey?" Joyce emerged from her bedroom in light blue pajama pants and an oversized night shirt. "Are you okay? I heard you screaming," She said, rushing up and cradling her younger son in her arms.

Jonathan opened his bedroom door, his long hair bedraggled. "What's going on?"

Sweat beaded at Will's forehead and he did his best to stop panting

and force his breathing to return to normal. "I-I'm okay," He managed, putting on his most reassuring voice. For a split second, he considered telling her everything. The vomiting, the slugs, the flashes back and forth into the Upside Down. It was all getting to be overwhelming, especially in the middle of the night when he hadn't gotten enough sleep. But then he remembered the turn-off notice and he saw the tired lines on his mom's face, the dark bags under her eyes and he couldn't do it. He couldn't add one more thing to the long list of things she had to worry about.

"I just um," He stalled as he came up with an excuse. "I went to the bathroom and I tripped coming out and I uh, almost fell,"

Joyce looked at him strangely. "O-Okay, sweetie," She said, hugging him close. "You're sure you're alright?" She pulled away to look him over. Everything seemed normal from what she could tell.

"Yeah," Will nodded, offering her a tired smile. "I'm just gonna go back to bed now,"

"Okay," Joyce said, releasing him from her arms and watching him as he walked up to his bedroom door. "Sweet dreams,"

Will forced a smile before slipping back into his room and closing the door.

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Light from the moon bounced off the surface of the lake, illuminating the surrounding woods and making its way through the windows of Hopper's trailer. The light cast a soft white glow over the edges of the blanket that clung to his feet and he sighed with regret as he remembered what had transpired earlier that night.

He'd left the Byers house around 10 and headed back up to the hospital to sit with El. She'd seemed to enjoy the company but Hopper could tell she would have much rather had her friends there with her. On a whim, he'd brought one of the old books he used to read to Sarah and the idea of being read to seemed to brighten the young girl up. He'd been in the middle of their story when a soft knock at the door interrupted his imitation of a cranky old witch and

the two looked up to see Becky standing in the doorway.

She'd convinced Terry's home nurse to stay late in exchange for the day off tomorrow, giving her the chance to come back and officially meet her niece. She'd gone home before El had woken up and hadn't been able to get back to the hospital since then because of work and appointments for Terry. Granted, this wasn't the first time El was at least hearing about Becky but up until that point, she hadn't known who she was - just that she was a friend of Hopper's.

Becky stood by, her arms crossed over her chest and a tight smile on her face as she watched Hopper finish reading the story to El. All the while, she couldn't get over how many of the young girl's mannerisms reminded her of her sister before all the drugs. Back when they were kids and things seemed so much simpler.

"El, I want you to meet someone," Hopper said as he laid the children's book down on the table beside them. "This is Becky,"

El looked up at the woman with her messy waves and dark eyes, reciprocating the smile on Becky's face.

"Hi uh, El," Becky said in a soft voice as though she couldn't believe what was happening. She nodded to the book on the table. "Good story, huh?"

El followed the woman's gaze and gave a small, affirmative nod.

Becky responded with a nod of her own as she pursed her lips, unsure of what to say or do next. "Great,"

After a long pause in conversation, Hopper stood up from the chair he'd been sitting in by El's bed and stretched his back out. "Okay kiddo," He said, picking up his keys from the table and clipping them to his belt loop. "It's getting late and you should be getting some sleep,"

El looked down, nodding obediently as she nestled herself deeper into the thin hospital blanket.

"I'll be back in the morning, okay?" Hopper said, ruffling the girl's short hair.

El nodded, sinking her head back into the fluffy pillow behind her as she succumbed to a yawn.

Hopper and Becky stepped out into the hall and Hopper pulled the door half-way shut so as to keep out most of the light from the hallway. El had made it perfectly clear on the first night she was awake that she did *not* want the door to be completely closed at any time.

"What are you doing here?" Hopper asked in a hushed voice as he led them down the hall and away from El's door. "It's late,"

"I know, I know," Becky said and her nervousness became more evident in her voice. "I just - God, I *don't know*," She ran her hands through her hair which only served to make her wavy locks even more unruly.

"Okay, slow down," Hopper said in the stern yet calm way he had of taking control of a situation. "What's going on?"

Becky shrugged, lifting her gaze to meet his. "I can't leave her behind," Becky said, a simple smile on her face. "She's my niece and I just - God, this is crazy. How am I gonna do this?" She said, wavering between dedication and anxiety. "She doesn't know who the hell I am and *I* really don't know *her*. It's a crapshoot how Terry's gonna react but she... she's just a kid and she's been through hell and -"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Hopper said, placing heavy hands on her shoulders, effectively silencing the distraught woman. "Take a breath," He ordered and Becky relaxed under the pressure of his hands. "One thing at a time, alright?" He said, tilting his head down so as to look her in the eye. "And you're not gonna be alone in this, alright? She might be staying with you but remember what we talked about? Weekends?"

Becky nodded, her breathing slowing down. "Yeah,"

"I can tutor her on the weekends," Hopper reminded her. "You're not gonna be alone in this so don't worry about that," He said, his words gradually reassuring and calming her. "Everything else will come in time. The important thing is that we keep her safe and you get the

chance to get to know her,"

Becky pursed her lips, nodding, and strands of her soft brown hair tickled Hopper's face.

After that, they'd opted to stop at a local dive bar down the road from the hospital to further discuss the logistics of taking care of El once she got out of the hospital but after a while and after a few drinks, the conversation had taken several detours.

Becky lifted a finger, signaling to the bartender as she lifted her empty glass in her other hand. "Single malt, on the rocks," She said, handing him the glass and resting an elbow on the bar's edge. For a small town like Clarksville, the bar was quite busy with regular patrons sipping their usuals as they challenged one another in pool or sat down lazily chatting and watching the football game on the TV above the bar. However, for most places with higher populations, the turnout on this night would've been considered a dud.

"You really know your whiskey," Hopper smirked, shaking his head as he took a sip from his own glass.

"Yeah, well," Becky shrugged as the bartender sat a fresh drink atop the beverage napkin in front of her. "My grandfather ran his own place back in the day," She lifted the glass to her lips. "I practically grew up in a bar for the first half of my life,"

"Hmm," Hopper replied thoughtfully as he studied the red and orange patterns in the bartop.

"You know what's funny?" Becky said, now much more relaxed than she had been a couple hours ago as she ran her finger along the rim of her old-fashioned glass.

Hopper looked at her with interest as he sipped whiskey from his glass.

Becky giggled, taking another sip and setting the glass down on the coaster. "When you called me last week," She began, the corners of her lips turning upward into a slightly embarrassed but uninhibited grin. "I had kinda wondered if you were callin' to ask me out,"

Hopper's eyebrows shot up in amusement as he took another sip from his glass. "Oh really?"

"Mhm," Becky's voice was light and airy, echoing slightly into her glass as she drank. She smirked, shrugged, and sat her glass down, lifting her half-lidded gaze to meet his.

"Yeah, that is funny..." Hopper breathed, pursing his lips together as he sat his empty glass down on the bartop.

The rest of the memory was a sensory whirlwind of hands roaming, clothes flying, the uncomfortably limited amount of space his SUV provided, and the heat coming from their bodies.

Hopper groaned, rolling over in his bed as he tried to push the memory out of his mind and fall back asleep. He hadn't intended to hook up with Becky but his tendency for sleeping with different women had gotten the best of him. He only hoped that he hadn't made things even more complicated than they already were.

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"Very strange," A balding scientist with a grey mustache stepped back from the microscope. The lab had resumed its normal activities since the holiday and several of the tests done on the samples from the Upside Down had come back. "Very strange, indeed," He breathed as the younger researcher beside him looked on in earnest.

"That's animal tissue, isn't it?" The younger man inquired. "But that doesn't make sense,"

"I'm afraid it is, Kevin" The older man pinched the bridge between his nose. "No cell wall, no vacuoles..."

"I checked the other samples and they appear to be the same," Kevin said regretfully as he watched the older scientist lean to look through the microscope once more. "They all came from those yellow pods, sir,"

"Hmm," The senior researcher backed away once again, his face drawn with concern. "Yes, this is in no way foliage," He turned to Kevin with a grim look. "We'd best inform the director,"

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"Straddle the line in discord and rhyme, I'm on the hunt down I'm after you..."

[A/N: Okay, please don't hate me lol This fic is going to be a bumpy ride but TRUST ME, it will be worth it. My head canons and ships are pretty typical for the fandom but I have some experiences I want these characters to go through on their way there lol There is a method to my madness so I hope you stick around and see what I have in store for these lovely characters! ;)]

17. More Than Words

[A/N: Hey y'all! Thank you for reading up to this point! This will likely be my last chapter before the semester starts on Tuesday so I made sure to make it extra long for you guys! HOPEFULLY, I'll be able to still update on a regular basis (Maybe weekly?) during the semester - FINGERS CROSSED. Your reviews DEFINITELY help and especially with being busy with school, I'll need the motivation lol

Anywhoo, I hope you guys enjoy this chapter. I'm pretty excited about where this is going. Thanks for sticking with me on this crazy ride and don't forget to leave some love! :)]

Chapter 17: More Than Words (by Extreme)

"Now that I've tried to talk to you and make you understand, all you have to do is close your eyes and just reach out your hands and touch me - hold me close, don't ever let me go..."

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Another week seemed to pass in the blink of an eye. El's strength had returned and her doctors were satisfied that she was no longer in any medical danger. Much to everyone's relief, no one had attempted to look any deeper into her history than what Hopper and Becky had been able to provide, allowing her to remain under cover.

Hopper had brought the boys up for a visit after school and the kids were excitedly chatting about what they could do with El once she was released.

"She could read The Hobbit!" Dustin exclaimed. "And my Lord of the Rings books,"

"She's gotta learn *how* to read *first, dummy*," Lucas snorted amiably.

"We could teach her how to ride a bike!" Will suggested excitedly. "You don't already know how, do you?" He asked and El shook her head.

"Guys, what about Star Wars?" Mike chimed in, grinning as his friends' faces lit up.

"Yes! Holy shit!" Dustin could barely contain himself. "Okay, first thing we do when she gets outta here - 'A New Hope',"

The boys nodded their agreement as El smiled at her friends' satisfaction. She wasn't sure what she was in for but if her friends liked these things, she thought she probably would, too.

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"You guys haven't *told* her yet?!" Joyce exclaimed incredulously as she, Hopper, and Becky stood talking in the hallway. "She's being released *tomorrow!*"

"Which is why we're telling her *now*," Hopper said calmly as he led the two women to El's hospital room door. "It'll be fine,"

As the adults entered the room, the playful chatter of the pre-teens slowly ceased. Joyce looked expectantly at Hopper as Becky stood by, looking as uncomfortable and uncertain as she felt.

"Alright," Hopper said with a sigh as he pulled a chair up alongside El's bed. The young girl, sitting cross-legged atop her mattress, watched him curiously. "I've got some good news and I've got some news that you guys may take as bad news but trust me, it's still good,"

"Oh god," Dustin muttered, already anticipating the worst.

"Shut up," Lucas lightly whacked his friend on the arm. "He hasn't even said anything yet,"

"What is it?" Will asked.

"Okay," Hopper said as he exhaled. "I spoke with the doctors and El, you're going home first thing tomorrow morning,"

"That's awesome!" Dustin slapped El on the shoulder as Will and Lucas also expressed their enthusiasm.

"Guys," Mike said, drawing their attention. "He said there's bad news,

too. Remember?" He turned back to look at the chief. "What's the bad news?"

"It's not *bad*," Hopper clarified. "Okay," He said, bracing himself for what he anticipated to be a loud, disapproving reaction. "El, you know Becky," He said, gesturing to the woman behind him to stepped forward a couple paces. "Becky is... your aunt,"

"Oh *yeah*, he *did* say she was a 'relative'," Lucas murmured and Dustin responded with a wide-eyed facial expression.

"My...aunt?" El furrowed her eyebrows, looking past the chief and studying the woman. "A bug?"

"No El," Mike shook his head and the confused girl looked up at him. "Your aunt is a family member,"

"She's your parent's sister," Lucas elaborated.

El's puzzled expression deepened as she waited for the chief to continue.

"Your mom-" Hopper began. "Your *real* mom is Becky's sister and they live here in Clarksville. Once you're released tomorrow, you'll come home with me to Hawkins for the weekend and then you'll stay with Becky during the week,"

"Wait a minute," Mike interrupted, his brow furrowed with shock and dismay. "Why does she have to come back up here?"

"It's safer if she stays here," Hopper explained rationally.

"Bull," Mike replied automatically. "We can keep her safe. She stayed in my basement and *no one* knew about it for a week,"

"But they found out, didn't they?" Hopper countered sharply and Mike quieted, though his eyes shot daggers. "Here's the thing," The chief continued in a lower, hushed tone. "She's better off staying in Clarksville most of the time. The lab is still looking for her and if they figure out she's not in the Upside Down anymore, where do you think they're gonna look first?" He raised his eyebrows pointedly as he looked around at their frowning faces. "I'll tutor her on the weekends

so she can catch up to a reasonable level for school. You all can see her then but for now, the *safest* place for her to be is *with her family*,"

El's eyes darted back and forth between the chief and Mike. "Stay with Mike," She said, half pleading, half deciding for herself. She looked to Mike whose expression was equally as torn.

Hopper's face softened as he turned back to El. "I'm afraid that's not an option,"

"No," El shook her head vigorously. "*No!*"

Joyce walked up to El's bedside, squeezing herself in front of Hopper. "Sweetheart," She said, taking El's hand in hers and the girl paused at the touch. "I know all of this is scary," She said and El turned to the woman, her eyes softening. "But..." She glanced at the chief who was watching her curiously. "Hopper's right. We need to keep you safe," Joyce said, emphasizing her words with gentle shakes of El's hand. "We'd all like to see you all the time but you should get to know your aunt," A tight smile traced her lips. "She wants to be there for you, too," El looked over Joyce's shoulder at Becky who had taken a few steps forward but had remained quiet. Instead, she was watching the scene unfold patiently. "Look around this room. Everyone here wants the best for you, honey. None of us want to see anything happen to you and if I have anything to do about it-" She looked around at the solemn faces surrounding them. "You will *never* have to go back to that bad place again, okay?"

El pursed her lips, locking her eyes on Joyce's face. "You'll still see us but the most important thing right now is keeping you safe," Joyce said with a warm smile that had an almost hypnotizingly calming effect on El. "You are the bravest little girl I know, do you know that?" El looked down at her lap. It was still so strange to hear someone sing her praises. "Well, it's true. I know you can handle whatever comes your way but I don't want you to forget you're not alone," She said, dipping her head to regain El's eye contact and the girl looked up again. "Okay? You're not alone. Not anymore," Joyce finished, pulling El close to her in a hug and El rested her head against Joyce's shoulder.

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"But that's not fair!" Mike protested, angrily waving his arms around as he argued with his mother in their living room later that night.

"The answer is *no, Michael*," Karen said sternly. "We don't have the room and I agree with Chief Hopper. El should be -"

"That is such bull!" Mike interrupted.

"Language!" His father scolded from his place on the La-Z-Boy as he read the paper.

"I didn't even *say it!*" Mike exclaimed incredulously, then turned to follow his mom into the kitchen. "We can make room," He said in a calmer tone, trying to reason with her. "She could take my room and I could stay in the basement. I'm down there all the time anyways,"

"Mike," Karen sighed, resting her hands on the kitchen island. "I'm sorry, but I'm not going to change my mind," She said empathetically. "If El has family in Clarksville, she should be with them. I couldn't even imagine how I'd feel if you or Nancy or Holly had to live with another family a half hour away,"

"That's totally different though," Mike protested. "They don't even *know* her,"

"Then they deserve the chance," Karen countered and Mike opened his mouth to argue more but decided against it. At this point, he was drained and with a frustrated grumble, trudged up the stairs to his room.

Passing his sister's room, he heard Nancy call out. "Hey Mike?"

He paused, rolling his eyes as he back-tracked a couple steps and poked his head in her doorway. Truth be told, all he wanted to do right now was sulk in his room. "Yeah?"

"Come here for a second," She said from her place at her desk, gesturing with her head for him to step inside the room.

"I'm really not in the mood, Nancy," He grumbled but the teen rolled her eyes.

"Too bad," She said, turning in her seat to face him as he crossed his arms and frowned at the floor. "Does El need clothes for when she gets out of the hospital? I was thinking I could go through some of my old stuff and see if there's anything she might be able to fit into. I've been meaning to clean my closet out anyway,"

"I dunno, I guess," Mike huffed.

"What the hell is *your* problem?" Nancy grimaced at her brother.

"*Nothing*," Mike replied brusquely.

"Yeah right," She retorted, shooting him a pointed look. "No more secrets, Mike, remember? Besides, I heard you and Mom yelling,"

Mike let out a dramatic sigh, rolling his eyes. "El's getting out of the hospital tomorrow and Mom won't let her stay here. The chief found some aunt of El's that doesn't even *know* her and now El's supposed to stay with her, and I guess her mom, during the week and then come back to Hawkins on the weekends for tutoring with the chief," He explained, tumbling into a tangent. "But it's total crap because she should be with her friends. Nobody else knows her like me and Dustin and Lucas. Hell, even the Byers' know her better than Becky does. And Will was in the Upside Down when El was around but *still*. If they wanted to know her so bad, why didn't they find her before we did? Why didn't they stop her from having to go through all that stuff with the bad men and the lab and -"

"Whoa, okay!" Nancy, surprised by Mike's outburst, put up her hands to try and slow him down. "Okay, I get it,"

"And so," Mike continued. "I was trying to get Mom to let El stay here. She stayed here for a *week* before and it didn't bother anyone. She and Dad didn't even *notice*. But they still won't listen," He finished, quieting down and partially regretting unloading all of that on his sister but he was so frustrated he needed to vent to *someone*. "They think El should be with her family *even though* they don't even *know* her,"

"Okay," Nancy began calmly. "First of all, you know she was never going to go for the idea of El moving in here," She said, her statement

irritating Mike further despite the truth in it.

"Is this supposed to be *helping*?" He retorted.

"Look," Nancy said assertively. "It's obvious you like Eleven a lot -"

"I don't -" Mike began to protest but Nancy cut him off.

"Ah!" She held up her index finger, silencing him. "Don't even try to deny it, okay? Just let me finish,"

Mike sighed dramatically but allowed Nancy to continue, now mildly aware of how her statement about liking El had made him feel uncomfortably sheepish.

"I'm sure there's probably more to the story but based on what I *do* know, I think Mom's right. If her family is back in the picture, you can't do anything about that," Nancy continued. "Besides, you're still seeing her on the weekends or something, right?"

"Yeah, I guess" Mike muttered reluctantly. "The chief's tutoring her for school..."

"Right, okay," Nancy said. "So then, instead of spending all this time fighting with Mom and getting pissed, why don't you do something nice for El? It's not like you're never going to see her and she's probably more scared and worried than you are so why don't you just be there for her when you can?"

Mike was quiet for a moment, processing his sister's comments. He knew she was right - unlike the time El spent in the Upside Down over the past month, there was more certainty now that he'd be able to see her on a somewhat regular basis. Even if it wasn't as frequently as he'd prefer. Still, he hated the idea of her being so far away most of the week. What if she stopped wanting to hang out with him? What if she made new friends in Clarksville and eventually stopped coming back to Hawkins altogether?

"She's coming home this weekend, right?" Nancy continued, unfazed by her brother's silence. "Why don't you plan a welcome home party or something?" She suggested casually. "What would El like?"

Mike's brow softened as Nancy's suggestion spurred his thoughts. "I did mention going to see Christmas lights and I think she'd like that,"

"Okay, so do that," Nancy said plainly. "I don't know how many people are still gonna have their lights *up* but go for it,"

Mike shrugged, shifting his weight as he crossed and uncrossed his arms. "Why are you being so nice all of a sudden?"

Nancy deadpanned at his comment and rolled her eyes before shrugging. "I just want to help. Besides, I like El," Nancy smiled, then glanced back at her closet. "Speaking of which, I should start going through my old stuff if she's coming home tomorrow. I'll let you know if I find anything that could fit her,"

"Okay," Mike half-smiled. "Thanks, Nancy,"

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Nancy knelt in front of her closet later that evening, digging through a tattered cardboard box she'd unearthed from the back of her overflowing closet. She had started a pile of potential clothing items for El that was now sitting atop her bedspread, leaning and in danger of falling at an exponentially slow rate. She'd packed this box over the summer when her mom had insisted they start getting more organized and had put together a donation for the Purple Heart Foundation collection going at church. Nancy had set these clothes aside as items that she didn't necessarily want to donate yet but that didn't quite fit anymore. So far, she'd found two shirts, a sweater, a skirt, and a mildly scuffed pair of Mary Janes. She wasn't sure of El's shoe size but Nancy had small feet even now as a teenager so it was possible these could fit the younger girl.

As Nancy explored the contents of the floor of her closet, rediscovering different objects, bins, and boxes that had previously been forgotten, she pulled out an old shoebox. It was covered in glittering stickers and Nancy's heart felt hollow in her chest as she gingerly pulled the box into her lap, leaning back against her closet door.

Lifting the shoebox lid, Nancy was bombarded with memories as old

pictures of her and Barb seemed to be overflowing from the small box. They couldn't have been any older than Mike and his friends in many of these pictures and Nancy pursed her lips as she remembered the summer she and Barb went to Cascade Lake and stayed at Barb's parents' cabin for a long Memorial Day weekend several years ago. Barb's glasses were almost as big as her head and the redhead only barely towered over Nancy's gangly form. Nancy stared at the picture, studying every detail and remembering the sights, sounds, and smells of that day. The heat of the late May sun, the smell of burgers cooking on the grill and bug spray on their skin, the floppy hat Barb had worn to protect her fair skin from burning.

Ever since November, Nancy had mostly kept to herself. The only ones who actually knew that Barb was dead were those who'd been with El during her trip in the sensory deprivation tank. Everyone else in town thought she'd run away, as inexplicable as that explanation had been, and she was powerless to do anything about it. The chief had made it very clear that they couldn't speak to anyone outside of their circle about what had happened and so Nancy carried the burden of this knowledge alone.

Sure, Steve was there for her as any boyfriend would be but he didn't really get it and every time she tried to talk to him about it, he became visibly uncomfortable. But how could she blame him? They were teenagers. They weren't supposed to have to deal with the concept of their best friends dying. Nevermind the fact that while Nancy was well-liked by many of her peers, she'd been closest to Barb and with her gone, there was a hole in her life that only a good girl friend could fill. When she and Steve had tense arguments, there was no best friend to vent to and no one to swoon with when things were going well. No one to talk to about her conflicted feelings and newfound friendship with Jonathan Byers...

As tears slipped out of the corners of Nancy's eyes, she cradled the lake picture to her chest, drawing in a haggard breath as she sobbed silently, trying to avoid the possibility of her mom or anyone else hearing her. She was growing far too used to grieving alone.

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El fluctuated between nervous and excited as she stood surrounded

by everyone she had grown to know and trust, awaiting her discharge paperwork. Jonathan had brought the boys up right after school and Joyce had opted for a later evening shift so she could be there for El's release. Hopper was at the nurse's station talking to one of El's nurses and Becky was stuck at work. Hopper had told her not to worry about it since El was going home with him for the weekend anyway.

"Are we gonna talk about what happened the other night or...?" Becky had asked him over the phone earlier that day and the question swirled around in his mind, distracting him as he signed form after form at the head nurse's request. He wasn't sure how to answer or even what there was to talk about so he'd made an excuse and gotten off the phone. He knew he needed to have a discussion with her, though. He just wasn't looking forward to it.

Mike had brought the clothes from Nancy as well as several of his own belongings including a T shirt and two beat up pairs of converses. The Mary Janes Nancy had packed were a little too big for El's feet but she'd still insisted on keeping them, calling them "pretty" and nestling them safely beside her on the bed. Now dressed in a light blue knee-length summer skirt and a dark purple wool sweater, along with a pair of bright red high-tops, El couldn't have been more mis-matched. She seemed unfazed, however, as she watched her friends chatter endlessly about Star Wars with a pleasant smile on her face.

"We're all set," Hopper said, carrying a packet of paperwork in one hand as he entered the room. "Time to go,"

"El, did you um, wanna borrow my jacket?" Mike offered, mildly self-conscious of the six other sets of eyes on them. "It's kind of cold outside but I don't need it,"

Dustin smirked devilishly, nudging Mike and the mopsy-haired kid shoved his friend's arm away with embarrassment.

"That won't be necessary," Joyce said, turning and retrieving a large bag she'd left sitting in the corner when she'd arrived earlier. "I hope it fits; it might be a little big," The woman said as she pulled out a large, brown winter coat with a wide hood. El stared at it with wide eyes as Joyce shucked the plastic store bag off of the garment. The

fabric found a delicate balance between coarse and soft as El tentatively reached out and touched the coat with her fingertips. The lining was thick and she could tell it would be warm even before Joyce helped her to slip her arms through the sleeves. Shrugging into the coat, El pulled the hood over her head and wrapped the sides around her thin frame. Joyce smiled with satisfaction as the girl beamed, her face barely visible under the massive hood.

"She looks like a Jedi," Lucas laughed.

"Dude," Dustin corrected with a grin. "She is a Jedi!"

"*True*," Lucas admitted, smiling.

Once everyone had gathered their belongings, the group made their way out of the hospital with El in the center and Mike trailing close by. He wanted to be near her but didn't want to be weird about it. He went back and forth, feeling self-conscious about his proximity to El at times and not caring about who noticed his behavior at others. She seemed in awe of the sights and sounds of the hospital as they made their way down the halls and Mike noticed the subtle concern in her eyes as they passed through the sterile white corridors.

He thought about saying something to comfort her - after seeing the lab in person, he could imagine how the hospital would still freak her out even though she knew what it was now. Everyone else around them was talking and caught up in their own conversations but he was also aware that if he suddenly started talking when he'd largely been quiet, it would draw attention and he'd already narrowly avoided embarrassment when he'd offered El his jacket. As he debated the proper way to interact with El without overwhelming her or drawing unwanted attention to himself, he felt a tickle at his hand by his side. Before he could register it and respond, El had grabbed his hand and shot him a small, shy smile. Mike smiled back and fought away the blush creeping up his neck as they continued out of the hospital.

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Amidst some protest, Hopper had informed the boys that they could come over and hang out with El later that evening but not right away

so as to give El time to get settled. They had reluctantly agreed and Jonathan took the boys home, Joyce went to work, and Hopper headed back to his house with El. Between running back and forth to Clarksville to look in on El, making his regular appearances throughout the week at the lab, and maintaining a steady presence at the station as police chief, Hopper's modest home had fallen into even more disarray than usual. Newspapers were strewn about, dirty dishes piled high in the sink and across the kitchen counter, and everything from the TV remotes to the bathroom hand towel to the kitchen chairs was in need of straightening up.

"Sorry about the mess," Hopper said gruffly as he unlocked the door and led El into the space.

She looked around in bemused wonder as she stepped inside, Hopper closing the door behind her. The front door opened up into a kitchen and dining area and to the left of them was a small living room with an adjacent hallway. To the right was a smaller room with a chair in the corner and a double-sized bed.

"I figure you can take the couch this weekend," Hopper said as he busily tried to straighten up the couch, fixing cushions and folding a crochet throw that had been lying haphazardly across the seats. "Believe it or not, this room is in the best shape out of all of 'em,"

El vaguely listened as he spoke, choosing to investigate the room instead. The dining room table was covered in books and empty beer cans and the ashtray needed to be emptied. A child's drawing hung on the small stretch of wall space between the front door and the window and El wondered if Hopper was the man depicted in the image. And if he was, who the little girl and the woman were standing next to him.

"There's a den at the end of that hallway," Hopper nodded in the direction of the hall as he collected empty beer cans from the coffee table. "It's a war-zone right now but I'll try and get that cleared out for you so you have some more space when you're here," He said, walking into the kitchen area and unloading the cans in his arms onto the counter, some of which toppled over and rolled a bit before coming to a stop against the used dishes and upright cans.

El hugged the bag of clothes from Nancy close to her chest as she tentatively ventured into the living area, dropping the bag on the end of the couch and carefully sitting down.

"I think there's still some lunch-meat in here if you're hungry," Hopper went on as he opened the fridge and examined its contents, unaware of El's half-hearted attention. "Ugh," He grimaced, mumbling as he tossed one of the lunch-meat bags into the trash can. "Well, *that's* no good but there's still some turkey and cheese," He closed the fridge and walked into the living room where El was sitting stock-still on the couch. The only part of her that moved was her head as she studied the room's contents. "Do you want anything to eat?"

Before El could answer, the phone beside the couch sprang to life and the shrill ring caused El to jump.

"It's just the phone," Hopper said reassuringly as he walked over and picked up the receiver. "Hello?" El watched as his face fell and his brow furrowed. He made eye contact with her and lifted a finger to his lips, motioning for her to remain silent, though that was all but unnecessary given how quiet she typically was anyway. "Alright, got it," Hopper said after a moment's pause. "I'll be in soon,"

El watched him expectantly as he hung up and gripped his forehead in his hand, sliding it down his face.

"Okay, change of plans," Hopper said as he exhaled. Having to be the bearer of bad news was getting a little old. "I've gotta go to the lab tonight so your friends aren't gonna be able to come over after all,"

El looked worriedly at the phone, then back to Hopper. He'd already explained to El how he was working undercover with the lab and that's how he'd been able to find and rescue her. Still, he could imagine that connection would still make her a bit nervous and he tried to be more patient and understanding than he'd been with the boys.

"I wasn't planning on being there this weekend but if I don't go in and they get suspicious, they could end up snooping around this place and we don't want that," He said sympathetically but the forlorn expression on her face was difficult to say no to. "Tell you what," He

said after a few moments' pause. While he couldn't stay, it also didn't make sense for her to be alone and there weren't many people that were available and could be trusted with the knowledge of her existence. "*One* friend and you have to stay inside, do you understand? We need to be careful. No going to anyone else's houses, no playing outside, no nonsense, understand? And *no* funny business,"

El's expression brightened and her lips curved in a small smile. "Mike?"

"Sure," Hopper sighed, realizing she was liable to have him wrapped around her finger before he knew it. "Whoever you want,"

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Hopper headed off to the lab later that evening after having spread the word that the boys would not be able to come over tonight. Rather than use the phone, knowing the lab could potentially still be listening in, Hopper drove El over to the Wheeler house earlier that afternoon.

"Oh my god, El!" Nancy exclaimed when she opened the door and saw the familiar young girl standing at their doorstep. "Hi!" She lifted her gaze away from El and up to the chief. "What's going on?"

"Mike?" El asked politely and Nancy couldn't help but grin.

"He's downstairs," She answered. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," Hopper reassured her. "We just had a little change of plans today and thought it'd be best to deliver the information in person,"

"Oh," Nancy pursed her lips, nodding. "Okay, well let me go get Mike," She said and stepped away from the doorway.

El poked her head into the familiar house, watching as Nancy walked into the kitchen and turned the corner to yell down the basement steps for her brother. She could even hear his footsteps clomping up the wooden staircase before he came around the wall and stopped when he saw El in the foyer.

"El?" Mike asked as he rushed over to her. "What are you doing here? I thought we were going over to see you later," His voice was equally confused and disappointed.

"I have to go into *work*," Hopper said pointedly, alluding to the lab. "So that plan's been changed,"

"So are you staying here?" Mike inquired, slightly hopeful.

El shook her head. "Come over,"

"Okay, here's the deal," Hopper said in a low voice as he leaned in close to the boy. It was only the three of them in the foyer as Nancy had gone back upstairs but he still wanted to be careful. "I've gotta go back to the lab so the four of you can't come over tonight, *however*," His voice was stern and intimidating but his "however" induced an expectant look on Mike's face. "She shouldn't be home alone so if your parents are alright with it, you can stay with her while I'm gone,"

"Okay!" Mike said excitedly and began to turn on his heel to grab his coat before Hopper stopped him.

"I'm not done," The chief said and Mike turned back, listening obediently. "You stay in the house, you do not call or answer the door to anyone, you watch TV or something and wait for me to get back. No *funny business*, Wheeler," El lifted an eyebrow at that term Hopper had used again. She'd have to ask Mike what that meant later.

After nervously agreeing to Hopper's terms, Mike hurriedly called his friends on his supercom, alerting them to the change in plans for the night before riding back to Hopper's house with him and El.

And so Hopper found himself driving to the lab, running through his decisions and hoping he'd made the right call. His supervisor at the lab had said they'd made a recent discovery that needed further investigation and had specifically requested that Hopper come in that night. As much as Hopper didn't like the idea of leaving El *and* Mike home alone on her first night, with all things considered, it seemed like the best option. He didn't want any unwanted attention and especially if that discovery happened to be related to El, they needed

to keep everything looking and seeming as normal as possible. No extra guests at anyone's houses, no excited pre-teen reunion parties. El was quiet enough and had proven herself to be both resilient and inconspicuous so Hopper trusted that she'd be okay but it didn't hurt to have someone with her. The only reservation Hopper had at this point was whether it was better leaving El home alone or leaving her home alone with a pre-teen boy who seemed to be crazy about her. At this point, all he could really do was put his protective, fatherly instincts on the backburner so he could focus on whatever it was the lab wanted him to do. For now.

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Shortly after Hopper left but not before giving Mike several embarrassing warnings about "inappropriate behavior", "hormones", and "not in my house", Mike and El were watching TV in the living room of Hopper's trailer. El was lying on her stomach, her head propped up in her hands as Mike sat by the TV, flipping through channels faster than El could keep up.

"There's nothing *good* on," He grumbled, sitting back on his haunches as an evening news anchor summarized the details of a previous story.

El pulled herself into a sitting position, tucking her legs under her and resting her hands on her knees. She looked down for a moment in thought, then back up to Mike with a smile. "Christmas lights?"

"What?" Mike turned to her and shook his head. "No, we can't. The chief said we can't go outside, remember?"

El's face fell and she stood up, moving to flop down on the couch.

Feeling torn, Mike groaned. "We can't risk anyone seeing you and recognizing you,"

El nodded but her face was still drawn with disappointment. She looked up at Mike and offered a small smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, the sight of it driving Mike crazy. He hated the idea of having to say no when it had been *his* idea in the first place. He pondered for a moment before speaking again.

"Maybe..." He began. "Maybe we can go out for a *little while*. But we've gotta keep you hidden so no one can recognize you,"

And that is how Mike and El ended up walking out of Hopper's trailer with her jedi coat hood pulled far over her head such that her face was cloaked in darkness. His own hood was pulled over his head but his messy dark brown locks found a way to pop out around his face.

"Are your legs cold?" Mike asked, noting the way her skirt did nothing to keep her bare calves warm.

"A little," El admitted quietly.

"Maybe we should go back inside?" Mike offered but El clutched the sleeve of his jacket and shook her head vigorously.

"You're sure you don't mind?" He asked and El nodded her head, smiling at him. In the shadow of her hood he could just barely make out the delicate features of her face but that was still enough to send a flurry of butterflies loose in his stomach. "O-Okay, let's go then,"

Hopper's trailer was a bit off the beaten path so it took a little while before they made it to a small neighborhood. Aside from one house at the end, everyone on this street had already taken their holiday lights down.

"Sorry El," Mike apologized as they made their way closer to the lit house. "We can try again next year - before Christmas when *everybody* has their lights up,"

But El wasn't paying attention to his apologies. Instead, her gaze was fixated on the twinkling lights of the house in front of her. Small white lights were wrapped around the metal railings of the porch along with green garland and bright red bows placed evenly apart. A nativity scene was carefully arranged on the ground next to the house, the figures glowing brightly from the lights within. The front door and windows were bordered with lights and a single candle sat in each of the house's windows. A small tree in the front of the house was wrapped in lights as well as bows and ball ornaments of different colors and a large star glowed from the top of the evergreen. El tried to get closer but Mike grabbed her arm.

"You can't go up on their lawn," Mike gently warned. "Somebody might notice you and come outside,"

El bit her lip, disappointed, but redirected her attention back to the house. She'd never seen anything like it and the soft glow from the lights cast a gentle light on her otherwise hidden face.

"Pretty," She breathed, smiling up at the house as Mike stood beside her, watching her reaction.

"Yeah," He said quietly, his eyes never leaving her face, though she didn't notice. "Really pretty,"

As they made their way back to Hopper's trailer, Mike fidgeted with his hands in anticipation.

"Hey El?" He said after taking the past ten minutes to work up his nerve. As she turned to him, her face perpetually nonchalant, he struggled to find his words. "I um," He stopped walking and El watched him curiously. "I brought something for you," He said, slipping his backpack off and crouching down to rest the bag on the sidewalk and dig through its contents. "Well, I mean, Dustin and Lucas and Will chipped in, too," He admitted, holding onto the item in his bag as El quirked her head at his strange behavior.

"Present?" She guessed and Mike half-smiled.

"Yeah, I guess you could call it that," He said, pulling a brand new supercom out of his bag, a bright green bow taped at the base of the antenna. "So uh, we all pitched in and got this for you so you'd be able to talk to us whenever you wanted... um, before we knew you were gonna be staying with Becky," He said glumly.

El looked from the supercom to Mike, her smile widening as she reached out to touch the device.

"Here," He said, handing it to her. "Um, I can show you how to use it. You probably won't be able to reach us except when you're here on the weekends but you should still have it," As she studied her new supercom, her smile was infectious and Mike couldn't help himself from beaming. "Think of it as a belated Christmas present,"

El reached out, grabbing Mike's hand in hers and catching him off-guard such that he almost jumped away at the contact. Instead, he stood stock-still, his face like a deer caught in headlights as her eyes locked on his. "Thank you," Her voice was soft and warm and he could swear that even in the crisp January air, he could quite possibly melt into a puddle on the sidewalk.

"Uh," Mike said, unconsciously taking a step forward without realizing his foot had gotten caught in one of the straps of his backpack. Before he could fall completely, however, he felt a strange, immobilizing sensation sweep over his body before he involuntarily leaned back into an upright position. "Whoa!" He exclaimed once El had released her mental grip on him. "I um, thanks El," He said, getting his bearings and noticing the small drip of blood coming from her nostril. "Is that the first time you've used your powers since -"

El's slight nod and woozy expression gave him pause.

"Are you okay?" He asked, bracing her so that she wouldn't fall if she happened to faint. "We should get you back now. Can you still walk?"

El meekly nodded and, satisfied with her apparent stability, Mike released his grip on her long enough to bend down and pick up his bag. As he lifted the backpack, something fell out of the open front pocket, landing on the sidewalk with a clack and drawing their attention to the ground.

"Oh crap!" Mike exclaimed, quickly bending down to pick up his melted picture frame and stuffing it back into his bag.

"What is it?" El's curiosity piqued, she spoke slowly and deliberately.

"Um, it's nothing," Mike muttered, zipping the bag shut again.

"Mike," El said in a voice that was both scolding and endearing. "Friends don't lie,"

"It's... it's not ready yet. I've gotta fix it" He replied, huffing. "If I even *can*," El continued to stare at him and the confused, intrigued crinkling of her eyes was all it took to break down Mike's resolve. "Okay, fine, I guess you already saw it anyway," He sighed, digging

the small frame back out of his backpack and holding it out in his hand for her to see. "It's supposed to stand up but that side got melted," He explained as she leaned in close to inspect the strange plastic object. "It's a picture frame... or at least it *was*. You're supposed to slip a photo in through that little space there but there's no way it would work now so I've gotta try and fix it,"

El gingerly lifted the frame from Mike's hand and admired it, turning it around so she could see it from every angle.

"Do...Do you like it?" Mike asked and El gave a small nod, returning it to his hand. "I was thinking um..." He rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "I was thinking maybe we could take a picture sometime and put it in the frame. If you wanted to,"

The corner of El's mouth quirked up into a smile and she nodded. "Okay,"

"Um, okay," Mike said, mirroring her expression. "Great. I've just gotta fix it first... or I could make a new one, too," He shrugged and returned the frame to his backpack, taking extra care to place it in the front pocket where it'd be less likely to endure additional damage from everything else in his bag. "Ready to go?" He asked as he slipped his arms through the straps of his backpack.

El nodded and the two continued on their way back to the house with El clutching the sleeve of Mike's jacket. Unsure of what to do with his hands, Mike held the straps of his backpack such that his elbows bent and he was unable to awkwardly fidget as they walked. El kept her new supercom held tight in her other hand as they made their way away from the neighborhood and back through the more densely wooded area surrounding Hopper's trailer.

All the while, Mike couldn't help but wonder what she was thinking. Sometimes he wished she'd talk more but then other times, like tonight, her quiet demeanor made it seem easier to say what was on his mind. He could so easily get caught up in his own thoughts that he'd get tongue-tied and babble on and on which he still did with her but she didn't seem to mind. Her quiet smiles were reassuring and she made him feel really good. He didn't want her to live so far away but maybe Nancy was right. If he still got to spend time with her like

this, even if it was only on the weekends, he really couldn't complain.

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"More than words is all I ever needed you to show. Then you wouldn't have to say that you love me 'cause I'd already know..."

.....

[A/N: Phew! That was a long one lol I hope you all enjoyed it. If you're diggin' this fic, please follow/favorite/review and I'll do my best to update as soon as I can! I know I'm gonna be busy so bear with me D: Thanks so much for reading and all of your support! See ya soon :)]

18. Take On Me

[A/N: Hey everyone! Ahhhh it feels like it's been forever. As predicted, my life has become crazy with school and work. I had planned on getting more content into this chapter but I'm just honestly tired and felt like it would take me FOREVER to post if I waited to get to a certain point SO I broke it up and this is what we have. Things will get juicier as we go on (especially the next chapter - that will be fun :)). I hope you're still enjoying the fic and thank you for all the reviews. I'll try and get the next chapter out as soon as I can.

Also, some of you had questions about where El was staying/Hopper leaving her with Mike at his trailer. Hopefully this chapter helps to explain his reasoning.]

Chapter 18: Take On Me (by A-Ha)

"We're talking away. I don't know what I'm to say, I'll say it anyway. Today's another day to find you..."

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The streetlights were on as Hopper made his way back to his trailer, dotting the roads' edges with pools of light. He'd had a hard time focusing on everything the lab agents and scientists had been talking about as he kept wondering if Mike and El had been discovered or if they were being... *appropriate*. He kept reminding himself that out of all of his unfavorable options, this had been the least compromising of them all. He could've left her at the Wheeler household but that house was already hot on the lab's radar since they'd found El living there before. Nevermind the fact that he wasn't prepared to explain El's appearance and background to Karen and Ted when the lab wanted him to get there ASAP. He could've left El at the trailer alone but she *had* just gotten out of the hospital that day and it made sense to have someone with her in case she needed assistance or her condition deteriorated again. Plus, he wasn't comfortable leaving her alone when there was a nefarious government agency after her anyway. So leaving her at home with a companion wasn't ideal but the other options didn't sit well with him either. He would've much

preferred that Joyce or Becky stay with her but Becky was working and a half hour away, Joyce was working and there was no way he could ask her to skip a shift considering her situation. He could begrudgingly admit that Mike had housed and kept El safe for quite a while so that's why he didn't fight El's request to have Mike stay with her while he was gone. Still, it made him uncomfortable in the way only a father can feel leaving their daughter alone with a boy who liked her... and she wasn't even his daughter.

He'd kept his attention balanced between wondering and worrying about what was going on at home and the information he was getting from the scientists at the lab. They'd apparently made some sort of discovery with the samples they'd collected during their last venture into the Upside Down but were careful to avoid divulging complete details to Hopper. All he knew was that they needed more samples to collect additional tests which meant another trip to the Upside Down was in order. He'd have to return to the lab the following evening, almost as soon as he left the station. Judging by the taut and solemn faces of the scientists, Hopper figured he was in for a long night tomorrow. He could already hear Flo's voice chastising him for coming in late Tuesday morning but what good was being chief if he couldn't have a little leeway in his schedule from time to time?

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Nancy sat cross-legged on her bed, diligently making new note cards for her upcoming mid-term Chemistry exam. The task had become mindlessly tedious and her thoughts had begun to wander shortly after getting into her second pack of index cards.

She'd originally been thinking about going to the mall that weekend to find a new dress for the Valentine's dance next month. She knew she was going with Steve and somehow that certainty felt both comfortable and numbing at the same time. He'd wanted her to come out tonight and see a movie with him since it was a Friday night but she'd just wanted to go home. She was in a loop that repeated itself day after day. She'd go to school, spend some time in the afternoon with Steve, come home and do homework or just lay on her bed and get lost in her thoughts until it was time to go to sleep. Then she'd wake up the next day and do the same things, with only minor alterations, all over again. Weekends were a little different in that she

didn't have to go to school but the rotation between talking to and spending time with Steve and studying or completing homework remained the same. She couldn't explain why but it'd become quite difficult to keep her mind focused on whatever was going on around her at a given moment and she wasn't as interested in things like the mall and the movies anymore. The only thing that she could force herself to pay attention to was school work and even that had become more laborious.

Everything reminded her of the Upside Down, the monster, and of Barb. When she wasn't experiencing periodic rushes of panic, she was heartbroken and torn over the loss of her friend. Steve didn't understand her feelings and he didn't understand her guilt. Of course he was sympathetic and he held her when she cried but he didn't truly know what was going on inside her and truthfully, she couldn't explain it well if she tried. She'd go over that night in her head until she couldn't take it anymore. Her last words to Barb, the look on her friend's face, imagining what Barb had experienced and what had happened while Nancy was with Steve that night. She'd had no idea and Steve had reminded her of that countless times but it didn't stop the hot coal of guilt that burned in her chest every time she thought about it. Despite Barb's warnings, Steve had turned out to be a pretty good guy after everything that had happened but there was a small voice in Nancy's head that thought maybe Barb would still be here if they hadn't gone to Steve's that night - if Nancy hadn't *insisted* on Barb coming along - or if Nancy hadn't gone up to his room and left Barb without making sure she got home okay. And then the cycle of blaming would fluctuate between Steve and herself until she'd become so disgusted that she couldn't stand to be around anyone and she'd isolate herself in her room.

From what she could tell, she came across as normal to everyone around her. She'd perfected the art of convincing her mom there was nothing to worry about because she knew her mom would tirelessly worry and pester her to confide in her until she broke down. That was something that she didn't want with *anyone* and so her feelings and concerns remained private, heavy as the burden may have been.

Nancy hadn't realized how much her focus had drifted until she reviewed the note cards she'd just made and realized she'd put the

same answer on the back of the last twenty cards.

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El had spent the following day, Saturday, practicing math and learning about English and science and social studies with Hopper. He'd picked up several books from the library and El's eyes had widened considerably when she woke to find mounds of books teetering atop the coffee table in front of her.

While she could tell Hopper was not the best teacher and obviously felt out of his element, she liked hearing the stories he read during "social studies". She especially enjoyed the science book and listened eagerly as Hopper read about solar systems and gravity and molecules. She couldn't wait for the day she'd be able to read these books on her own but for now, they'd practiced small words and "sounding out". It was hard to remember what sounds she was supposed to make for which words and sometimes those sounds were different which only confused her more but Hopper had insisted she'd get it eventually. She'd decided that school work was okay but the broad overview of subjects from English to science to math had been a bit overwhelming.

After spending Saturday studying and practicing math with Hopper, El was elated to be spending Sunday at the Wheeler house with her friends.

Hopper had brought El over in the early afternoon, just after the Wheelers had gotten home from church. Ever since the events that transpired back in November, Karen had had a newfound desire to attend church as regularly as possible and so she'd dragged the rest of her less enthused family along with her that morning.

Mike was still wearing the grey dress pants and white shirt his mom had insisted he wear when he opened the door. "El!" He exclaimed, a little more excitedly than he'd intended. "Um, I mean, hey," He said in an attempt to sound more casual, then noted Hopper's towering presence. "Hi Chief,"

"Hey kid," Hopper replied. "Where's your mom?"

"Oh, uh," Mike paused. "I think she's in the kitchen,"

Hopper nodded his understanding and the trio walked toward the kitchen where Karen was assembling a tray of lunch meats and cheese slices.

"Mom," Mike said as he led the guests into the room. "El's here, and the Chief,"

Karen turned around from her place at the counter and smiled. "Oh hi, Chief!" She looked at the petite, seemingly timid young girl standing between her son and the police chief. "Hello El,"

Hopper nodded respectfully, "Afternoon, Karen," He glanced at the kids standing beside him. "Do you have a minute?"

"Um," She paused, assessing how much she still had to do to prepare lunch. "Sure," She said pleasantly as she wiped her hands on the dish towel hanging from the oven handle. "Mike, why don't you and El go downstairs and -"

Mike didn't need to hear anymore. "C'mon, El," He said, grabbing her hand and excitedly pulling her over to the doorway to the basement. "Dustin's here and Lucas and Will are coming over soon for lunch. We were gonna play D&D but maybe we could do something else if you wanted?" He babbled as the two clomped down the wooden staircase, his voice echoing against the walls. "Like watch Star Wars or we could go to the arcade later - unless you wanted to learn how to play Dungeons and Dragons? The guys might not wanna start over or introduce a new player just yet but -"

"Mike!" Karen called after him. "Don't forget, we're eating lunch in fifteen minutes!"

"Okay!" Mike yelled up to her, his pubescent voice cracking as he did so.

"Hey El!" Dustin greeted brightly once they got down into the basement. "What's up?"

She lifted her shoulders in response, a subtle smile tracing her lips.

"Lucas just radioed in," Dustin said. "He and Will should be here in a couple minutes,"

"Cool," Mike replied, his mind still whirring over how to best spend the day now that El was here. "Maybe you could be a cleric," He mused, flipping through his binder full of D&D notes. "Or a wizard like Will,"

"Wait, she's playing?" Dustin asked, dumbfounded. "You're playing?" He turned to El.

El's eyes widened and she shook her head, lifting her shoulders in confusion.

"We could always do something else," Mike shrugged, abandoning his binder and looking around the basement for an idea as Dustin watched his friend with a bewildered but amused expression. Mike only acted weird and hyper like this when he liked a girl. While none of his past crushes had ever amounted to anything, Dustin was keenly aware of his friend's behavior, possibly even more so than Mike was.

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"Mike told me about her father," Karen said sympathetically once Mike and El were downstairs. "It's just awful to think someone would hurt their own child,"

"Yeah," Hopper replied, retracing what he knew of the story Mike had told his mom in his head. "That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. See, I'm watching her for the weekend and then tomorrow she goes up to stay with her aunt,"

"Mike told me about that," Karen nodded in affirmation. "I'm so glad she has a family to stay with,"

"Right," Hopper said, continuing. "So anyway, we're trying to keep her situation on the down-low, if you catch my drift,"

"Ahh, yes" Karen breathed. "Because of her father,"

Hopper paused, thinking quickly on his feet. "Right. So thank you for letting her hang out here for the day. I know she really wanted to

spend some time with her friends. But," He pulled a notepad and pen out of his shirt pocket and began to write. "If anything happens, if you need anything, give me a call, okay? This is the station and the one underneath is my house phone," He ripped the small sheet of paper from the notepad and handed it to Karen.

"I'm sure everything will be fine," Karen said with a smile as she scanned the numbers on the paper. "It's really sweet of you to go to such lengths for her,"

"Yeah, well," Hopper mumbled uncomfortably. "Anyway, thanks again for letting her come over today,"

"Of course," Karen waved him off. "She's welcome here anytime,"

A knock on the door disrupted their conversation and Karen walked over to the basement door. "Mike!" She called down. "Lucas and Will are here!"

"Coming!"

"Well, I'm gonna take off," Hopper said, taking the lead as they walked into the foyer. "I'll be back around 7:30 to pick her up,"

"Of course," Karen replied as she opened the door to Lucas and Will. "Hey boys, we're gonna eat lunch in five minutes so go get washed up,"

"Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler," They chimed as they darted into the house. "Hey Chief!"

Hopper nodded to the boys, then Karen. "See ya later, Karen,"

As Hopper made his way to his SUV, he ran through all of the potentials for the day. The likelihood of the lab finding her right away was slim but he couldn't shake the idea of what could possibly go wrong if they had even the slightest hint of suspicion that El was back at the Wheeler house. As he climbed into his SUV and turned the key in the ignition, he debated his next move. Since November, things had gone back to being as quiet as they'd ever been down at the station so he pulled out of the driveway and drove up the street a ways, just far enough to be out of sight but close enough to keep an

eye on the house and be there if anything went awry.

.....

Nancy was reclined back against her bedframe, knees bent and chemistry note-cards in her lap as she quizzed herself when she heard her mom calling upstairs. She'd decided to go to the mall in search of a dress after lunch but her motivation to do so had been wavering all morning. With a sigh she set the thick stack of index cards down on the top of her comforter and flipped her legs off the edge of the bed. She could hear her brother's friends chatting animatedly before she even padded down the carpeted staircase.

Her mom had laid out an assortment of turkey, ham, and roast beef lunch meats along with American and Swiss cheese slices, two different loaves of bread, and a variety of condiments. As everyone settled into their seats, chatting amiably and putting together their sandwiches, Nancy noticed El sitting at the end of the table next to Mike.

"Oh, hey El," She greeted the girl who offered a small smile in response. Nancy furrowed her brow, taking in the girl's appearance. "Aren't those the same clothes I gave Mike to give you?"

El looked down at her purple wool sweater and wrinkled cotton dress with a self-conscious expression and gave a small nod, almost unnoticeable.

"No, don't feel bad," Nancy noted the way El's face fell. "I'm going to the mall later; do you wanna come?" While she'd been unenthusiastic about getting out of the house and going to the mall, inviting El to come along was a way of pushing herself to get out of the house. Aside from going to church that morning, she hadn't left since Friday, even despite Steve's attempts at coaxing her out.

"What is the mall?" El spoke slowly and instinctively looked to Mike for an explanation.

"It's a big building with a bunch of stores in it where you can buy clothes and games and food and stuff," He supplied automatically, his mouth still partially full as he sat his sandwich down on his plate. He

was very used to being a walking dictionary for her at this point. "But we were gonna play D&D and then maybe watch Star Wars," He swallowed and turned back to his sister. "El hasn't seen it,"

"Mike, she's been wearing the same clothes for *three days straight*," Nancy reasoned, quirking an eyebrow at her oblivious brother. "I think she could use a quick shopping trip,"

"I think that sounds like a great idea," Karen agreed as she fed a piece of cheese to Holly. "I can give you a ride after lunch,"

"Okay, fine," Mike mumbled, huffing. "Do you wanna go, El?"

El looked around the table at each of the faces staring at her, waiting for her to answer, and gave a hesitant nod.

"Okay, great," Nancy smiled at El and took a sip of her glass of water. Then she turned to Mike and added in a teasing tone, "Don't worry, Mike. I'll bring her back," to which he rolled his eyes.

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"So needless to say, I'm odds and ends. I'll be stumbling away, slowly learning that life is okay. Say after me, it's no better to be safe than sorry..."

19. Separate Ways

[A/N: OMG, you guys. I died writing this, okay? I'm like, laughing and giggling and I'm just no good. XD I've gotta get back to schoolwork now but I hope you enjoy this! I certainly enjoyed writing it haha. Let me know your thoughts in the reviews!

Also, forgot to mention this in my last post but dudes - that teaser trailer, though?! I can not wait for season 2. I'm legit dying over here. And the new pics of them? They're growing up?! Ahhhhhh. And El's hair?! And the tiny tidbits of plot that they've revealed so far? I am no more good. I am dead. I need this show so bad XD]

Chapter 19: Separate Ways (by Journey)

"Troubled times, caught between confusions and pain... Distant eyes, promises we made were in vain..."

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The mall was an overwhelming place full of delicious smells, bright colors and lights, and hundreds of people milling about and nearly running into El. She couldn't read most of the signs in front of the stores but she assumed they described whatever was in the stores and the bright fluorescent lighting gave her a headache. Everyone seemed to know exactly where they were going, whereas El would've been completely lost if she wasn't clinging tightly to Nancy's jacket sleeve. Despite the sensory overload, El was fascinated by the tall ceilings, open atriums, and all of the pretty dresses and sweaters and shoes they passed in store after store. Nancy was looking for a particular place that El couldn't remember the name of but she was content to follow along. She did hope, however, that they would find whatever that delicious smell was that tickled El's nose and was making her mouth water despite having just had lunch.

"It's this one," Nancy said as she led El toward a large department store with lights even brighter than those in the main corridors of the mall.

El blinked as they stepped through the threshold, the white linoleum flooring making the place almost blinding. People of all ages were scattered around the store, at the cash registers, flipping through the clothes that hung on silver racks, walking through the aisles as they sought out whatever specific item they had in mind. El followed Nancy to a section of the store that seemed to be overflowing with pretty dresses and colorful shirts and skirts. There were racks with more sweaters than she could think to try on and every type of jacket she could imagine. On the other side of the aisle was a huge area with row after row of shelves with dozens of shoes of all types lined up along the top.

"Okay," Nancy said, placing a finger to her chin as she thought. "I just need to get a dress but you probably need a little bit of everything I'm guessing,"

El watched as Nancy flipped through some pink shirts that were hanging on the rack next to her.

"Let's try a few of these," She said as she gathered shirts from various racks around them. "I'm pretty sure this size should fit since that fits you perfectly," She nodded to the old sweater El was wearing and El followed the teen through rows of clothes, trying to keep up both physically and mentally.

After a few minutes of collecting various articles of clothing, Nancy led El to the dressing rooms.

"Okay, so you go in - take these with you," She explained as she handed the pile of clothes to El who tried her best not to lose her balance or drop anything when she wasn't expecting them to be so heavy. "Try everything on and see what you like. Mom gave me \$30 so that should be enough to get you a few things for the week,"

El carefully balanced everything in her arms as she walked toward one of the stalls before realizing she would be closed in. She halted immediately.

"What is it?" Nancy asked, then realization dawned on her. "Oh, right. Mike said you don't like closed spaces," She thought for a minute. "Okay, um, here's a bigger stall if you want to try that? I could come

in with you if that helps,"

El considered this option for a minute, eyeing the larger stall at the end before nodding in agreement. Nancy followed her into the stall and El looked warily at the door as Nancy secured the lock behind them.

"Okay," Nancy said, taking some of the clothing items off the top of the pile in El's arms. "Let's put these up here," She said as she began hanging shirts and pants and dresses up on hooks on one side of the stall. "And when you find stuff you like, we can put it on those hooks," She pointed to a couple metal hooks on the opposite side. "Anything that you don't like, we'll just leave in the stall. Make sense?"

El nodded hesitantly, looking at the monstrous outgrowth of clothes on the wall beside her. It seemed like such an arduous task but she removed the first item from the hook on the wall, setting it down on the bench beside her before bending down to untie her shoes. Back in the lab, she often changed in front of the guards and scientists so the concept of privacy was relatively foreign to her. Whether it was to change into her wetsuit for the sensory deprivation tank or before physical examinations, there were often people around her working even if they weren't directly monitoring or escorting her. Mike's insistence that she change her clothes alone in the bathroom on the night they found her had been the first time anyone had introduced the idea to her.

Nancy stood by patiently, respecting El's privacy by averting her eyes and focusing on the clothing she would be trying on, however, when she looked up for a brief second, she couldn't help but notice the tattered condition of the girl's underwear.

"Hey El," Nancy said discreetly, without looking up, as she continued to sort through the clothes hanging on the wall. "Do you think you have enough underwear? Maybe we could pick some of those out for your today, too,"

El looked down at her waist. The white cotton had turned to a dingy shade of beige and the elastic at the edges was beginning to fray, creating holes between the waistband and the cotton fabric. She

couldn't remember the last time she'd been given new underwear - she distinctly remembered receiving this pair about a week before she escaped the lab, just after her biweekly shower.

"Yes," El murmured softly as she slipped her legs into a pink floral skirt that fell to her knees. She beamed when she looked up in the mirror and saw the way it flowed, giving it a spin before grinning with delight.

"That's a good one," Nancy smiled. "Do you wanna try this one with it?" She plucked a long-sleeve white shirt from the massive collection on the wall.

El nodded excitedly, taking the shirt from Nancy and quickly swapping her purple sweater for the soft white garment. This entire experience was so new to El and she couldn't stop herself from smiling. Everything was so new and fresh, the fabrics were soft and smelled clean. She'd spent her life wearing the same patterned hospital gown with new, identical ones replacing the old ones when they became too frayed or needing washing. Faced with so many options and so many colors, all of which were up to her, was overwhelming but incredibly exciting.

With the white shirt on, El turned to Nancy with a bright smile, waiting for a response.

"Those look so good together!" Nancy smiled encouragingly. "Do you like it?"

El nodded vigorously, then turned back to the mirror, swinging her body slightly so that the skirt swished at her knees.

"Hmm," Nancy hummed thoughtfully as she noted El's reflection. "I have an idea. I'm gonna run out and get something really quick, okay? I'll be back in just a minute. Will you be okay by yourself?"

El's eyes widened with alarm and she pursed her lips slightly but nodded nonetheless.

"Be right back," Nancy said and ducked out of the stall. She was only gone for a couple minutes but El waited like a puppy in the doorway

of the stall anyway. When she returned, she was carrying three more items that looked like underwear but weren't.

"So I'm guessing you've never had a training bra," Nancy said as she untangled the straps on the bras that had jostled together.

El shook her head, staring at the bras in fascination as Nancy finally freed one from its plastic hanger. "Bra?"

"Yeah," Nancy nodded, holding the garment up against El's chest as El awkwardly tried to look down at it. "Bras support your um, boobs," She said, her eyebrows stitching together slightly as she broached the topic. She didn't want to embarrass El but she also thought *someone* should be explaining these things to her.

"Boobs?" El asked inquisitively, her eyebrows furrowed as though contemplating a complex equation.

"Yeah," Nancy said, trying to keep from chuckling at El's expression. "Uh, here," She gestured to her own chest. "There's probably a lot that you still have to learn about all this stuff but as girls get older, they develop breasts, or *boobs*, and you wear a bra to support them. Training bras are like practice before they develop because bras can be a little uncomfortable at first so this helps you get used to them,"

El nodded thoughtfully, taking the training bra from Nancy and studying it. She'd never seen anything like it but she liked the pretty lace pattern along the edges and the tiny pink bow in the center. She was learning so much in such a short amount of time but despite how overwhelming all of this new information was, she was eager to keep learning and experiencing more.

.....

After deciding on an assortment of clothes for El, Nancy had found her dress with relative ease. Karen was picking them up soon and they'd had just enough time to stop in the food court for some pizza, another new food for El. She'd already gotten her first taste of Hershey's Kisses after going through the checkout line in the department store. Nancy had grabbed a Milky Way from the small stand next to the register and El had chosen a bag of Hershey's Kisses.

"These are Hershey's Kisses," Nancy said as she loaded their items up on the counter for the cashier to ring up. "They're basically little pieces of milk chocolate. Just be careful you don't eat too many at once. You don't wanna overdo it and make yourself sick,"

El nodded solemnly as she placed the bag on the counter, eyeing the cashier warily though she was completely uninterested in the small girl peering over the counter-top.

They were making their way back to the other side of the mall to wait to be picked up when the enticing scent El had smelled earlier caught her nose's attention.

Nancy stopped walking when she noticed El was no longer at her side. "El?" She looked around, momentarily worried that she'd lost track of the girl. She could already hear Mike screaming at her before she saw El standing next to a Cinnabon storefront, her hands and nose up against the glass case that housed all of the delicious desserts.

"I guess you want one?" Nancy laughed as she walked over, gently peeling El off the glass. "Just don't tell my mom or Hopper that I got you all this junk food or I'll never hear the end of it, okay?"

"That smell," El said almost euphorically.

"That's the cinnamon," Nancy explained before stepping into the cashier's line. "They're pretty big so you might not finish it all before we go -"

"Hey Nancy," A familiar voice caught Nancy off-guard and she turned around to see Jonathan Byers standing beside her, a shopping bag in his hand. It'd been a couple weeks since she'd last spoken to him, though he'd certainly been on her reluctant mind. Despite seeing him at school and hearing him when he'd come over to pick up Will, it'd been some time since they'd last interacted.

"Oh, hey," She said, biting her bottom lip and looking down, then back up at him. "How are you?"

"I'm good," Jonathan said, appearing equally as unsure as to what to

say though he'd initiated the conversation. "You?"

"Good!" Nancy nodded. The two were quiet for a moment before noticing the line had moved and Nancy took a step forward with Jonathan stepping forward as well as they both chuckled awkwardly. All the while, El watched with perplexed fascination at the exchange between the two teens.

"So um," Nancy ventured. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh," Jonathan said as though she'd startled him. "Uh, shoes," He shrugged, gesturing with the bag in his hand. "For work,"

Nancy nodded thoughtfully. "Cool..."

"Yeah..." Jonathan trailed off. "Well, I should go,"

"Okay, yeah," Nancy said, a little too quickly. "The line's moving anyway," She jerked a thumb at the remaining customer in front of her.

"I guess I'll see you around," Jonathan said as he started to move past her and El, noticing the short girl for the first time since coming over. "Bye El!"

"See ya," Nancy called after him, cringing at her awkwardness once his back was turned as El waved nonchalantly. "Phew," Nancy exhaled as she stepped up to the cashier and placed the order as El curiously watched Jonathan's form disappear in the crowd. All the while, El wondered why Nancy and Jonathan had acted so strange with one another but then, who was she to judge?

.....

Much to Nancy's surprise and Karen's dismay, El had already polished off her cinnamon bun by the time they pulled into the Wheeler's driveway. The boys were down in the basement in the midst of a D&D campaign when they got in the house. Karen carried Holly into the living room where Ted sat watching Wheel of Fortune, Nancy took her new dress upstairs, and El bounded excitedly for the basement door with two large shopping bags bouncing around as she trotted down the steps.

"Hey, El's back," Dustin looked up and Mike immediately stood up from his seat.

"Hey El!" He greeted her in his unintentionally over-attentive way. "Did you have fun?"

El nodded vigorously, her face beaming as she held her bags close.

"Did you find anything cool?" Will asked pleasantly and El nodded again, walking over to the table. She began pulling garments out, placing them on the edge of the table, and Lucas scooted their game board off-center so as to make room.

The boys watched awkwardly as El's pile of clothing grew, almost toppling over into Dustin's lap before he caught it. To be honest, a clothes shopping trip wasn't exactly the most exciting topic for the boys but none of them had the heart to show it, seeing the elated look on El's face. Rarely had she ever looked so happy and excited about something so they politely forced their enthusiasm for her sake. As the indiscriminate collection of fabrics and colors grew, El nonchalantly dug into her second bag, pulling out two packs of pink and purple girls' underwear with butterfly and heart designs as well as two frilly training bras, placing them on top.

"Whoa!" Lucas exclaimed as the boys' eyes widened with shock.

Immediately, the boys' scooted away from the table and averted their eyes, looking anywhere but at the table as the undergarments began to slide off the top of the pile toward Dustin and he reflexively pushed them away, yelping at the same time.

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!"

It had all happened so fast that in his effort to keep the underwear from getting too close, he'd leaned back a bit too far in his chair and went toppling backwards.

"El!" Mike exclaimed, frozen. His first inclination was to grab the items and quickly put them back in the bag but then he *really* did not want to touch them. He could already feel that his face had turned beet-red. "Uh, you need to -"

"Put that shit back in the bag!" Lucas exclaimed abruptly.

"Remember when we talked about privacy?" Mike asked, trying to force away his embarrassment as El looked at him with a slightly hurt, confused look. "Th-this is another one of those times. You don't show... uh, those things to other people,"

"Nancy helped," El defended.

Mike grimaced. He really did not want to think about his sister going underwear-shopping. "That's different,"

"She's a *girl*," Lucas added.

"Girls show each other those kinds of things," Will offered, his cheeks tinged pink as he looked directly at El and kept his eyes off of the table. "But that's not something you'd show us,"

"Because you're boys?" El asked hesitantly, still trying to understand why her friends had reacted so negatively. She'd thought the bras and panties were really pretty and Nancy had agreed.

"Yes!" They all replied emphatically as Dustin settled himself back into his chair, leaning back and clutching his curly locks in his hands as he stared at the ceiling.

El quietly and quickly collected her clothes from the table, stuffing everything back into the shopping bags as the boys collectively sighed in relief. Dustin mouthed '*She really just did that?!*' with an incredulous facial expression and his eyes bugged-out as Lucas shook his head and Will stared at the table. Mike watched as El tucked her shopping bags in a corner next to the table that was still supporting her blanket fort.

"So," Mike began as El walked back over to them, hoping a change of subject would lessen the discomfort in the room. "My mom said the chief is picking you up at 7:30. We have some time to watch the first Star Wars movie, if you want?"

El pursed her lips and nodded her agreement so the boys abandoned their game as Mike rolled a TV stand out from the back of the basement. The screen was smaller than the one they had upstairs but

this way they could remain comfortably in the basement rather than battle Mike's parents or Holly for control of the TV upstairs. The TV sat atop a wooden cart that had a cabinet door opening up to reveal two shelves, one of which held a VCR. On the lower shelf, an array of VHS movies were piled high.

El slipped out of her coat to get comfortable on the couch as Mike set up the movie. Lucas and Dustin chatted at the table as Will sat quietly. He'd actually been feeling a little better over the past couple of days and he hadn't slipped into the Upside Down at any point. He still felt a little 'off' but he tried not to think about it too much.

Once the movie was set up and playing, Mike flipped the main light switch for the basement, removing the glare from the screen. A smaller lamp in the corner was still on, keeping them from pitch blackness as Mike made his way over to the couch and sat down next to El, though not too close. Lucas sat on the far end of the couch next to Mike as Dustin settled on the floor with his back against the couch and Will moved to a chair on the other side of the table so he could see the screen.

As the triumphant brass fanfare of the opening theme began to play, Mike turned to El, "The opening crawl is gonna have a lot of text explaining the backstory for the movie," He said as the Star Wars logo began to retreat on the screen. "I can read it for you if you want? It goes kind of fast and I know you don't really -" Mike cut himself off when El nodded, her lip curled on one side in a half-smile. "Okay," Mike said, turning back to the screen as the text began to appear. "The first thing said, 'A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away'. Okay, so, um, 'Episode four, A New Hope'," He added, slightly rushing to catch up as the text scrolled up and away. He put on a theatrical, narrative voice. "It is a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the *evil* Galactic Empire,"

Lucas and Dustin shot each other half-annoyed, half-amused looks as Mike read dramatically for El.

"During the battle, rebel spies managed to steal the plans to the Empire's ultimate weapon, the *DEATH STAR*, an armored space station with enough power to destroy an entire *planet*," Mike

continued, faltering slightly when El scooted closer to him, her eyes fixed with fascination on the screen. "Uh, um, 'Pursued by the Empire's sinister agents, Princess Leia races home aboard her starship, custodian of the stolen plans that can save her people and restore freedom to the galaxy,'" He finished a little quicker than he'd started, his heart beating uncomfortably fast as El rested her head on his shoulder.

El wasn't aware of the way Mike's cheeks were flushed, especially in the darkened light of the basement. She was in complete awe as she watched the camera tilt down from the sea of stars and the movie began. She'd never seen anything like this and she was transfixed. It was sort of like when she'd watched TV in the living room back when no one was supposed to know she was living there except this felt bigger. The intro music was exciting and Mike's story-telling was fun to listen to. It wasn't until thirty minutes into the movie that she peeled her eyes away from the screen, remembering that she had chocolate in the pocket of her coat as her stomach rumbled with hunger.

Mike tried not to notice when El lifted her head from his shoulder, forcing himself to keep watching the TV and not her. He didn't want to make her uncomfortable by being *too* attentive, though he couldn't help it sometimes. Truthfully, he also felt a little self-conscious with all of his friends in the room, too.

El retrieved her bag of Hershey's Kisses from her coat and pulled out one of the foil-wrapped morsels. She gently tapped Mike on the arm, her voice quiet but audible, "Want a Kiss?"

Mike stiffened immediately, his eyes wide and his heart racing even faster than before. "*Wh-What?!*" He sputtered as he leaned away from her in surprise, his cheeks flaming hot at this point as Dustin and Lucas snickered, having obviously heard the exchange.

"You heard the lady," Dustin teased and Lucas guffawed.

El's eyebrows stitched together in confusion as the boys laughed. Even Will chuckled as Mike screwed his eyes shut in an attempt to pull himself together.

"Um," He said slowly as he took a deep breath and exhaled, his eyes still closed and his voice a little higher than usual. "What?"

El stared at him curiously as she lifted the chocolate candy for him to see. "Kiss?"

"Oh god," Mike sighed in relief, though his friends continued to laugh. "Um, I-I I'm okay. Thanks,"

El shrugged, popping the chocolate into her mouth and looking back at the movie as Mike practically melted into the couch cushions. His adrenaline subsiding, he stared at the floor, trying to force himself to relax quicker but his friends were no help.

"C'mon, Mike," Dustin whispered with a mischievous grin. "Don't you want a kiss from El?"

"Shut *up*, Dustin," Mike growled quietly, unbeknownst to El.

.

The rest of the evening went on uneventfully. Much to El's delight, Karen let them order pizza for dinner and between the five of them, they greedily consumed two pizzas as they finished the rest of the movie. The ending credits had just begun when the sound of the front door opening upstairs could be heard through the ceiling.

El visibly wilted when she heard the deep tone of Hopper's voice and the realization that their time together was over set in.

"*Mike!*" Karen called from upstairs. "*Chief Hopper is here to pick up El!*"

Mike sighed, reluctantly standing up. "C'mon El," He said despondently as everyone else stood up, stretching their legs after the long movie.

The kids trudged up the stairs and met Karen and Hopper in the foyer. El's jedi coat swallowed her up as she clutched her shopping bags, one in each hand.

"Hey kid," Hopper greeted her, then nodded to the boys. "You ready to go?"

El turned and looked wistfully at Mike who was staring at his feet. She turned back to the chief and nodded.

"Bye El," Lucas said warmly.

"See you next weekend," Dustin added.

Will gave her a quick wave. "Bye El,"

"Bye," She said quietly, looking around at each of them before looking at Mike who had yet to lift his gaze. "Bye Mike," She said softly and he looked up, his face crestfallen.

"Bye El," He said quietly, his voice cracking slightly.

El noticed the way that Mike looked more sad than any of them and she didn't want to see him that way even if she felt it, too. After all, she really didn't want to leave but she had to. Despite the reduced range of motion in her coat and her occupied hands, El took a step toward Mike, enveloping him in the best hug she could manage before pulling away. They exchanged a smile that went unnoticed by no one and Hopper escorted her out of the house into the cold, dark night.

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"If you must go, I wish you love. You'll never walk alone. Take care my love, miss you love..."

20. Two Steps Behind

[A/N: So um, here's some plot development. Let me know what you think. :)]

Chapter 20: Two Steps Behind (by Def Leppard)

"Walk away, if you want to. It's okay, if you need to. You can run but you can never hide from the shadow that's creepin' up beside you..."

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Some heat still clung to the SUV's interior when El and Hopper got into the vehicle to head up to Clarksville. Hopper had loaded El's few belongings into the backseat where they now mingled with the shopping bags from her trip with Nancy. El sat quietly in the passenger seat, watching the beaming bright headlights of cars passing by on the opposite side of the road. The trees along the highway were barren and a thick fog had settled over the ground, making it difficult to see too far ahead.

"So um," Hopper began gruffly after ten minutes of silence. "Did you have any uh, questions? About living up in Clarksville?"

El's silence was answer enough and Hopper sighed.

"Look, I get it," He said sympathetically. "You wanna stay with your friends and you don't know Becky or Terry - er, your real mom," He glanced at the girl as she rested her hooded head against the glass window. "But you'll get to know them and you know as well as I do how important it is that the lab *not* know you're here," Still, she remained quiet and he exhaled, his shoulders sinking as he shifted his focus to the road ahead. Maybe there wasn't anything he could say to make this easier. Or maybe he just didn't have the words. Joyce was so much better at this kind of thing. Truth be told, he was a little uncomfortable himself thinking about seeing Becky face-to-face and knowing she was still waiting for some sort of answer from him about their previous *encounter*.

"I'll stick around for a little while once we get there," Hopper said

after a long pause. "And Becky will show you around - where to sleep, keep your stuff, a grand tour of the house, ya know? The week's gonna fly by," He tried to be reassuring. "Then we'll study some more and you can see your friends next weekend. It'll be fine,"

El glanced at him and offered a half-smile but it was more for her sake than his.

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Will and the rest of the guys left Mike's house shortly after El and Hopper. Mike had remained relatively sullen after El's departure but none of them felt the need to comment on it. He'd snap out of it and they were going to see her next weekend so it wasn't like she'd disappeared into another dimension or anything.

Jonathan had come to pick Will up and was asking him about his day with his friends as they made their way home. As they drove down the darkened neighborhood streets, Will desperately tried to keep focused on his responses instead of the creeping nausea that had taken root in his stomach. He clenched his eyes tight, leaning his head back into the headrest as he forced his answers.

"Are you okay?" Jonathan glanced at his brother with a concerned expression, having noticed his strained voice.

"I'm fine," Will said quickly, breathing slowly in order to keep himself steady. Over and over in his head he repeated the wish: *please don't disappear, please don't disappear.*

After a minute, the feeling subsided and Will breathed a sigh of relief. He had felt fine for a while now so he wasn't expecting another episode, let alone in front of Jonathan.

"What was that?" Jonathan asked as they turned onto the street that would lead them home.

"Oh," Will said, wracking his brain for a clever excuse. "We had a lot of pizza for dinner. I think I overdid it," Not terribly clever but it would do.

Jonathan chuckled, relieved. "That's surprising. You guys are like

bottomless pits when it comes to pizza,"

"Yeah," Will forced a laugh, looking out the window and wondering when these episodes would finally stop.

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The neighborhood was nearly pitch black when Hopper and El pulled up at the Ives' house sans a dim porch light by the front door. There were trees surrounding the lot and the house seemed to be tucked away in a corner such that El couldn't tell if there were any other houses nearby, especially in the darkness. The feeling of it all gave her an uneasy feeling as she tentatively stepped out and stood by the car. Hopper retrieved her bags from the backseat and led the way up the stone sidewalk to knock on the front door. There was a light on inside that shone through the white curtain that covered the window on the door and El watched as a shadow approached and the door opened, revealing Becky.

Aunt.

Becky was her aunt. What did that even mean? She was part of her 'family' but that was also a new word. Her friends had explained that *family* is made up of moms and dads, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles and cousins, but still, El wasn't sure what to make of the concept. Mike and Nancy's mom was nice and so was Will's mom, Joyce. Papa hadn't been nice, though. Was he still her family? Was someone still family if they did terrible things to you? 'Friends' made sense. El was developing a solid understanding of what made someone a good friend but 'family' was still confusing. They'd mentioned that she had a mom here, too. El wondered if her mom would be like Joyce or Mrs. Wheeler. Joyce was so warm and comforting and made El feel safe and special. Mrs. Wheeler was friendly and pretty and made delicious pies and meatloaf.

"Hey," Becky opened the door and stirred El from her thoughts. "Come on in,"

El paused, waiting for Hopper to go first, then looked around the foyer curiously as the adults talked.

"How's it goin', Jim?" Becky asked, her words seeming heavier than one would find in casual conversation.

"Uh, pretty good," Hopper furrowed his brow, nodding. He coughed. "How 'bout you?"

"I'm good," Becky's smile didn't meet her eyes and El thought it was strange how Hopper and Becky were sort of acting like Jonathan and Nancy had at the mall. "Terry's in bed for the night so we'll do introductions in the morning," Her voice was purposefully hushed but El had no trouble hearing it. She wasn't sure who Terry was but that also wasn't the most pressing thing on her mind.

"Anyway, um," Becky said, a bit louder and with more energy. "So... El, I guess I should show you around, huh? Do you wanna see your room?"

El looked to Hopper for support and the chief nodded.

"Okay," El's voice was quiet, uncertain but cautiously trusting.

The house was dark with a few warm lamps giving just enough light to see where they were going. El followed Becky down a hallway to a staircase near the back of the house. The wooden steps creaked and groaned loudly as they made their way upstairs and all the while, El could feel her nervousness running up and down her arms like spiders on her skin. The hallway at the top of the stairs was dark and Becky flipped a switch that illuminated the small space in a yellowish light.

"This one's yours," Becky said as she led El through the door of a room at the end of the hall. It was quite small, though not as small as the Room Papa had put her in when she misbehaved. There was a small bed with sheets that didn't match and a thick, puffy quilt. A dark brown dresser that had seen better days sat on the opposite side of the room. "I know it's not much but um, we'll spruce it up, you know?" She walked over to a small closet to the left of the door. "And we can put all your new stuff in the closet, or in the dresser if you want? I heard you went shopping today,"

El watched the woman with a probing curiosity. She didn't seem

dangerous and she wasn't actually scary. She seemed almost as nervous and unsure of herself as El was.

"So...yeah," Becky cleared her throat. "There's a room next door that we might move you into down the road but it's not ready right now. There's um, a lot of other stuff in it..." She trailed off and El wondered why that room made Becky's eyebrows knit together when she mentioned it.

"Okay, so, I'm gonna go talk to Chief Hopper for a minute," Becky said after a pause. "Did you wanna come downstairs or you could hang out here if you want? Look around?"

El wordlessly fell into step behind Becky as the two left the room and headed back downstairs where Hopper was still standing idly in the foyer, looking around at the pictures on the wall with his hands deep in his pockets. He looked up when he heard them approach.

"How is it?" He asked as he exhaled, his eyebrows lifting with the kind of forced optimism you use with kids when you know you're asking something of them that they're not happy about.

El said nothing, instead venturing into the living room to explore and inspect her new surroundings.

"So how have you been?" Becky asked once El was out of earshot.

"I'm uh, good," Hopper said, his gut telling him that the question was more loaded than it sounded and his first instinct was avoidance. "Did she like her room?"

Becky shrugged. "As much as any kid who's moving in with strangers, I guess?" She sighed. "What if she hates me? Or Terry? What if we screw everything up?"

"You're not gonna screw anything up," Hopper waved the idea off gruffly. "She's safe here, she's not gonna *hate* you. She just needs some time to acclimate,"

"I guess," Becky said half-heartedly, poking her head around the wall to see El gingerly touching the leaves of a potted plant in the corner of the room. "So we um," She turned back to him. "Should we talk?"

About..."

Hopper sighed. He didn't want to do this right now but truthfully, he didn't want to do it at all. "Yeaah," He said, drawing his voice out as if that could stall the inevitable. "I uh, I shouldn't have... done that,"

"Right," Becky nodded a little too quickly. "Yeah, I agree,"

"I mean, I don't wanna make things complicated, you know with *El*, and all this *lab stuff* I'm working on..." He trailed off. "Does that make sense?"

"Of course," Becky shook her head, her expression meant to convey a nonchalant attitude but it felt a little forced. "*Totally* understand,"

"Right," Hopper said with a cough. "But you - you're great," He quickly added and the corner of Becky's lips quirked up in a half smirk as her gaze fell to the floor. She looked over at El who was surveying a bookcase, delicately running her fingers over the spines of the old books which she was sure were covered with dust at this point.

"Okay well, I should get going," Hopper said, scrunching his face slightly as if the awkwardness of the situation was physically painful.

"Sure," Becky nodded, thinly veiling her disappointment. "Hey El?"

The girl turned around at the mention of her name and walked over to the adults.

"I'm gonna take off," Hopper said, crouching down to meet her at eye-level. "I'll be back to pick you up next weekend. Be good for Becky, okay?"

El glanced up at the woman. Her arms were crossed and she looked uncomfortable but she wore a tight smile as she looked down at them. El nodded to the chief and he ruffled her short hair as he stood back up.

"Let me know if you need anything, alright?" Hopper said more quietly to Becky and she nodded, watching as Hopper walked toward the door.

Suddenly, El piped up, "Weekend?"

"Yeah," Hopper replied definitively. "Friday," El's vacant, confused look gave him pause. "That's five days from now,"

"Five days," El repeated slowly, soaking in the information.

"Yup," Hopper said with a nod. He glanced between El and Becky. "Have a good night," He tipped his hat and stepped out onto the porch as Becky and El watched him from behind the screen door.

.....

El's bed squeaked when she moved and the springs bounced at the slightest adjustment of position. Still, the mattress was soft and the quilt was warm but she just couldn't fall asleep. Everything felt different. The air smelled different - older and colder. The empty room, while in itself not such a bad thing, reminded her of her bedroom in the lab in its simplicity and lack of design. The only thing that helped was the pale yellow color of the walls but with the lights off, that was gone. Moonlight creeped in through the window, casting a faint glow over the footboard at the edge of her bed. She could just barely make out the outline of her shopping bags in the corner. She made up stories in her mind, imagining the scenes playing out on the blank wall in front of her as she would often do in the lab when she was left alone for hours but that failed to keep her interest after a while.

Her hair had long since dried but her pillow still smelled of the rose and chamomile shampoo she'd used during her shower that night. Becky had told her she could pick out her own shampoo the next time they went shopping so she could choose her own scents but to be honest, El really liked Becky's and wanted to keep using it. She hadn't even known what shampoo was up until that point. In the lab, she was only given a bar of soap to wash everything and she hadn't known what to do with the myriad bottles in the Wheeler house so she'd stuck to the same familiar bathing routine. Hopper only had a 2 in 1 shampoo and body wash combo that had a strong smell that tickled El's nose. When Becky was helping El get ready for her shower that night, she'd explained what everything was.

"You can use anything you want in here," Becky had said. "We can go to the store sometime this week and get some stuff of your own,"

El had stared blankly at the items in the shower, noting the bar of soap as the only familiar item. There was a poofy pink ball hanging from the tub's faucet that she recognized from the Wheeler house but she'd never learned what they were. Bottles of varying shapes, sizes, and colors were lined up along the tub's edge, though not nearly as many as she'd seen at the Wheeler's.

"This one's shampoo," Becky pointed to a pink bottle in the corner. "And the white one's conditioner. You probably won't need much since your hair's..." She paused when El's face fell and she looked down.

"It doesn't matter," Becky shook her head. "Anyway, um..." She tapped her fingers against her hip as she got her thoughts back on track. "This is body wash, it's like soap," She explained, gesturing to a larger bottle in the corner closest to them. "Or you can use the bar of soap if you want," Becky turned around, patting a thick green towel with accompanying wash cloth. "You've got your towel and your wash cloth," She handed the small cloth square to El. "Night clothes are on the sink... I think you're good. Anything else?"

El looked at the tub, then back at Becky, shaking her head.

"Okay, well I'll give you some privacy," There was that word again. "The middle knob turns the shower head on, left is hot, right is cold," She walked toward the door. "I'll be downstairs," She said, pulling the door but El caught it with cat-like reflexes just before it closed.

"Open," El said quietly, her breath and anxiety caught in her throat.

Becky's eyebrows lifted. "Uh, okay then," She shrugged, adjusting the door so it was cracked slightly. "There you go,"

El had watched through the crack as Becky disappeared downstairs, listening for the squeaks and groans of the stairs before sighing and turning to the shower.

Her mind wide-awake and her legs restless, El tossed the quilt off of

her and poked her head out of the room. The hall light was off again but this time, she could see light peeking out from under the door of one of the rooms down the hall. Becky hadn't mentioned that room to her before bed and El wondered what or who was in there. Maybe Terry? Or her mom? Who was Terry? Were they nice? Would they like her? El noticed as she got closer that the door wasn't completely shut - it was cracked the slightest bit. Was Terry afraid of closed spaces, too? Maybe she would understand El. The thought propelled El forward, her curiosity and hope getting the best of her as she tentatively put her ear up to the door. She could hear the faint sound of voices and El wondered if there were more people in the room. Bells and other celebratory sounds echoed against the wooden floor and El's curiosity piqued - what was going on in there?

Her breathing was still and her adrenaline was pumping as she cautiously pushed the door open the tiniest bit, allowing her to see into the room. There was a bed against the same wall as the door and on the other side of the room, a TV was on with people dressed in bright colors, smiling broadly as a gigantic wheel spun round and round. El could see the outline of someone's legs under the covers and the back of a head with brown hair tied up in a bun. Was this Terry? Or her 'mom'? El squinted at the woman who had yet to notice her, intrigued by her lack of movement. Feeling brave, El pushed the door open a bit more to get a better look but the door creaked loudly and the woman's head slowly turned, her gaze vacant and half-lidded as she and El's eyes met.

Suddenly, El felt a pressure in her head unlike anything she'd felt before. Not that it was more powerful or painful, but it was strange and unfamiliar. Without warning, a barrage of images flashed across El's eyes. Bright, white walls and a woman, this woman, screaming in agony as doctors and nurses surrounded her. A baby crying as a man in a lab coat whisked the child away, the woman yelling desperately after them. The white hair and cold expression of the man looked eerily familiar and the realization was like a blow to the head. She remembered the middle school, the loud screeches of the Demogorgon as her friends shouted around her. The feeling of the cold lab table and the tears that dripped down the side of her face. She remembered the Upside Down and the yellow pods that glowed brightly in the dark, dank landscape. She could hear the muffled

voices of men approaching from the distance, looking for her. Each image overwhelmed her more than the last and all the while, this woman on the bed stared at her. The pain in her head intensified and the pressure felt like her head was being squeezed in a vice until she couldn't take it anymore - the sensations, the memories, the images were all too much and El began to scream, clutching her head in her hands.

I knew you'd come back to me.

There was a warm female voice in her head that only frightened her more. This was unlike anything she'd ever experienced thus far. She could travel across dimensions in her mind, listen to other people in other parts of the world without their knowledge but it was always under her control. She was the one doing it. How was this happening? Was she doing something? Was Terry?

"Hey! What's going on?!" Becky burst through the door to find El crouched on the floor, covering her ears as her screams melted into cries. "*Shit*," Her own adrenaline racing, she crouched down to El and gently put a hand on her back. "It's okay, you're safe, El," She said, rubbing the girl's back when her touch went unrejected. El's shoulders heaved as her sobs gradually slowed and Becky made shushing sounds that reminded her of running water.

"I guess you guys met already," Becky said, her voice tired as she looked at her sister. Terry's eyes and face were still expressionless. "I was gonna introduce you in the morning but um, I guess," She paused to look at the clock on Terry's nightstand. "4 am is fine, too,"

El had quieted, her eyelashes blinking away her tears as she stared at the floor, taking comfort in Becky's hand on her back.

"They found her, Terry," Becky said to her sister who only stared at the small girl on the floor. "This is Jane,"

Realizing it was much too late and everyone was much too tired to have a decent conversation about everything, Becky escorted El back to bed.

"I'll make breakfast in the morning and we can talk about everything,

okay?" Becky said as she tucked El in. "What do you like?"

Despite her lingering feelings of fear and confusion, El answered hopefully, "Eggos?"

"Hmm," Becky pondered. "I'll doubt we have any, but I know I've got a waffle iron,"

El stared at the edge of the quilt in front of her and Becky patted her knee over the blanket. "Try and get some sleep, okay?"

El nodded without looking up and listened for the sound of the door creaking open and almost closed as Becky went back to her own room.

Tossing onto her side, El looked out the window. She could see the leafless trees outside waving their branches in the wind and tried to focus on that movement rather than the whirlwind of images that had run through her head. She remembered destroying the Demogorgon and she remembered the Upside Down and... something bad was coming? But what? She remembered the government men in their hazmat suits looking for her in the Upside Down as she expertly outran and hid from them, concealing by the darkness. Their cautious, slow movements only made it easier to evade them. But a feeling in the pit of her stomach made her think there was more to it. Why couldn't she remember everything?

As she tried to make sense of everything - the crying baby and the distraught woman, the hauntingly familiar concrete walls and the face of her Papa - she shut her eyes tightly, trying to force other, more pleasant thoughts into her head. It was hard, though, because while part of her wanted to escape what frightened her, the other part was deeply curious. She wanted to understand. Who were the people in those images she didn't recognize? And who was the voice that spoke to her in her mind?

.....

There was a substitute in English class so everyone was more rowdy than usual. Mike sat with his elbow on his desk, propping his head up in his hand as he stared out the window. It'd been raining all morning

and the sky was heavy with clouds. The dead and dying grass seemed to glow green against the muted grey landscape. Mike retraced the previous day in his mind, savoring every moment he'd spent with El and trying to etch her face into his memory. Of course he knew that she was supposed to come back to Hawkins the following weekend but even when she was in the hospital, he'd been able to go up and see her almost every day. Waiting this long to see her again made him nervous. What if something happened? What if the lab men found her up there and took her? He'd never even know she was missing again...

They'd just finished reading 'The Outsiders' and now the substitute was playing the movie on a TV at the front of the classroom. Their teacher, Mrs. Briscoe, had left worksheets for them to complete in conjunction with the movie but most of the students weren't paying attention or were only half-engaged in the assignment. Dustin and Lucas were chatting to Mike's right, half-heartedly doing their work along with a handful of other students in the class. Will was on his left, quietly paying attention to the movie and answering all of the relevant questions on the worksheet and Mike had turned the worksheet over, making a list of all of the fun things they could do once El came back the following weekend. English class was cool in that it was the only class in which all four of them were together.

Some of the students at the front watched the movie with interest but Mike, Dustin, and Lucas were in the middle of the classroom, surrounded by students talking or wandering around them. The substitute had little control and was obviously unfamiliar with handling such a large class, if he had any teaching experience at all. By the middle of the class, he'd sequestered himself in the corner at Mrs. Briscoe's desk, doing paperwork of some sort and paying little attention to the class' antics.

"Look at these losers being all *good* for the substitute," Troy's mocking tone behind them brought an instant deadpan to each boy's face. The bully smacked the back of each boy's head as he went down the line. James chortled next to him, watching with crossed arms and a defiant expression.

"Get lost, Troy," Lucas turned in his chair, glaring at their tormentor.

"Oh," Troy drew his face downward, feigning sadness. "You want me to get lost?" He turned to James with a laugh. "He wants us to get *lost*," Will had yet to face the bullies, choosing instead to ignore them in the hope that they'd go away. "Maybe *you* could get lost, Fairy" Troy whacked Will in the back of the head again, this time eliciting a grunt from the small boy. "You were pretty good at it before. Practice makes perfect, you know,"

"Back off, Troy," Mike stood up from his seat, shooting daggers with his eyes.

"Or what?" Troy dared, shoving Mike in the chest.

"Mike, don't," Dustin grabbed at his friend's sleeve but Mike yanked his arm away.

"Just back off," Mike insisted, forcing himself to sound more intimidating, though it did little to help his case. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

"I've got all the time in the world," Troy shot back, his dark eyes glaring intently.

"That's actually kind of sad," Dustin snickered to Lucas.

"Shut up, *Toothless*," James kicked Dustin's chair hard and his grin abruptly faded.

"You know, I was thinking," Troy turned to James. "Will and his family would probably fit in with the Greasers if they weren't such wimpy fags. They're already trailer trash losers," James sniggered and Will ducked his head, focusing intensely on the worksheet in front of him but everyone could tell he heard what Troy said.

"Leave him alone!" Mike said forcefully, his brows deeply furrowed.

"What's going on back there?" The substitute finally noticed the commotion.

"Make me," Troy growled, stepping closer to Mike and taking up an uncomfortable amount of his personal space. "You can't," He said after a beat. "Without your freakazoid dyke of a girlfriend around,

you're the same old frog-faced *pussy*," Troy shoved Mike hard in the chest, forcing him to step back and almost trip over the leg of his chair.

Dustin noticed the rage brewing in Mike's eyes and stood up just as Mike was about to shove Troy back. "Mike!" He grabbed his friend's arms from behind, holding him in place which was relatively easy given their size difference. "C'mon, Mike. He's not worth it,"

"Sub's coming," Lucas muttered discreetly and turned back around to face his desk. As Troy and James walked back to their side of the classroom, Dustin gently forced Mike to sit back down but his angry scowl remained.

.....

The rain had let up by afternoon and El had taken her school books out to the front porch. The air was still heavy with moisture and the sky was overcast but the weather had warmed considerably, a strange but welcome contrast to the previous night's cold.

Becky had made breakfast that morning as promised after getting Terry out of bed and helping her downstairs. There were no Eggos in the house but El had watched in fascination as Becky had retrieved a plastic bottle from the cabinet, filled it with water, and then began to vigorously shake it.

Noticing El staring, Becky asked, "You wanna do it while I prep the iron?" El nodded and Becky handed her the bottle, double-checking that the cap was screwed on tight. "Shake it up real good, okay?"

El read some of the words on the bottle but only recognized a few, the most important being 'waffles'. As she shook the bottle as hard as she could, she wondered how this was going to work and if they would taste as good as Eggos.

Much to El's delight, these waffles were bigger and fluffier than the Eggos, so much so that she couldn't pick one up easily without it tearing. Becky had showed her how to cut it with a fork and knife and how you can add syrup and butter to make the waffles sweeter but in the end, El had opted to using her hands even as sticky brown

syrup dripped down her forearms.

Terry sat in front of the TV in the living room from the moment she got up, only looking away when Becky had helped her eat breakfast. Her movements were minimal - she changed the channel once in a while, she gestured to things, but for the most part, El never saw her move. It would've been easy to forget she was around if not for the nervous feeling El got when she was nearby after last night. Becky had talked to her for a little bit about when they would go shopping and what her time up here would be like. She was off work today but Tuesday through Friday, she'd be working until mid-afternoon. A day nurse named Rose would be here in the mornings and afternoons to tend to Terry but El didn't have to worry about her and was free to do pretty much anything she wanted. The only rules were to stay in sight of the house and don't go anywhere without letting Becky or Rose know where she was going.

El hadn't mentioned the strange visions she'd had last night in Terry's room and Becky seemed to be stalling on having that big conversation she'd been talking about until she came outside and sat down on a porch chair next to El.

"So I guess you probably figured out that Terry is your mom," Becky said to El whose eyes were fixed on the book in her lap. When she didn't say anything, Becky continued. "Okay, so I'm gonna be completely honest with you. I've never raised a kid. I take care of Terry - um, your *mom* but I don't actually know what I'm doing, okay? So gimme some credit here if I don't say or do something right,"

El looked up at that and gave a gentle nod. Encouraged, Becky went on. "So," She said, exhaling. "I don't really know where to start. I mean, I could tell you about how your mom ended up like she is now or I could tell you how we didn't even know you existed until a month ago..."

El looked toward the house and Becky took a guess. "Your mom did some experiments back when she was in school... um... they gave her some weird shit, uh..." She paused, unsure as to how she wanted to handle language around El but dismissed the thought. "Anyway, the stuff they gave her affected her mind. They put her in these isolation tanks -"

"The bath?" El finally spoke, catching Becky off-guard.

"Um, sure," Becky said. "You know about them?"

El nodded and Becky could feel her heart grow heavy. She knew the lab had conducted experiments on this girl but she wasn't aware of all of the details.

"Yeah well, the stuff they gave her got stronger and stronger and eventually it just messed her up," Becky shrugged, digging a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of her flannel shirt. "She doesn't really talk or do much but she's still in there," Becky tapped her own temple, a cigarette dangling between her fingers.

El nodded, processing this information. She wondered if Terry had had a Papa, if she had been doing these experiments as a little girl, too. She imagined the woman inside watching TV going into an isolation tank like Papa had put her in back at the lab. The idea seemed strange and yet it made sense.

Becky went back inside after a little while and El spent much of the afternoon out on the porch looking through the books Hopper got her from the library. When she wasn't doing anything, all she could think about was how she missed her friends and so she opted for a distraction. She'd spread everything out on a plastic table on the porch and was trying to recite the sounds associated with different letters when she combined two or more together. She was practicing the 'ch' and 'sh' words when a yellow school bus drove past and pulled up in front of another house on the other side of the woods. She didn't pay it much mind until an hour later when she heard the sound of girls laughing nearby. Setting her book down, El stood up from her chair and stretched her legs before stepping down off the porch and peering around the side of the house. In the light of day, she could see the other neighboring houses. Most were on the other side of the woods but there were two other houses nestled back behind them, just like hers. They also had long driveways that went past the woods and up to the main road and between each house was a splattering of trees. El crept past the saplings, peering around a thicker tree at the girls two houses down. Despite her cover, one of the girls, a redhead, noticed her.

"Hey!" She called out and El's eyes widened. "Hey, who are you?"

El immediately ducked behind the tree, panting.

"Did you just move in?" A different voice called out and El shut her eyes tight. She hoped they'd give up when they realized she was hidden or gone. She wasn't too far from the house so if she had to, she could run back inside. She was pretty fast.

"Hey," The first voice was closer and El peered around the trunk to see three girls standing at the edge of the patch of trees, watching her curiously.

El immediately jumped to standing and started backing away. She didn't know what to expect from these girls. She was in an unfamiliar area and she desperately wished Mike was here to explain things to her. She ran through all of her options. She could use her powers to push the girls away but she didn't want to hurt anyone and she didn't want anyone to know she had powers. She could run back to the house - she was pretty confident she would be faster than these girls. Still, their faces looked kind and she wondered if they were actually nice.

"I like your hair," The redhead said with a smile and El unconsciously reached for her head.

"Do you like punk?" One of the other girls, a brunette with tan skin, asked. El wasn't sure what that meant so she shrugged, her eyes still watching them intently.

"I'm Gabby," The redhead introduced herself and El noticed she had brown spots on her face like Mike. "That's Trish and that's Emma," She gestured to another girl with straight dirty blonde hair that fell almost to her butt. "What's your name?"

El looked from girl to girl, assessing the situation before finally deciding to take a chance. "El,"

.....

Four cups of coffee weren't enough to keep Hopper sharp at 3 am as he trudged through the Upside Down with another group of

scientists. Kevin and Linda were on this run as well as several others he didn't know by name. As they made their way through the decaying landscape, Hopper couldn't help but wonder how he, of all people, had ended up in this position. He was anything but a scientist and yet he was out collecting samples for some big experiment that he didn't know all the details about. The irony would've been enough to make him chuckle if he wasn't so exhausted.

The scientists spoke in hushed voices whenever they passed a yellow pod, collecting samples of the structure and making notes on pads of paper they'd brought with them, their writing clunky due to the large gloves on their hands.

Hopper contemplated how he was ever going to get out of this debt to the lab. As long as they didn't have El, he was stuck doing their dirty work. He wasn't about to give her up so the idea of disentangling himself from the lab was a bit more complicated.

Inside the lab, researchers sat in the control room, communicating with the ones who'd ventured through the portal. Many of them had bags under their eyes as the minutes and hours ticked on.

The door to the control room opened and a commanding figure entered, peering through the glass and staring in awe at the pulsing membranes of the portal.

"That's the director," An older, seasoned researcher leaned over and whispered to the younger man beside him. He couldn't have been more than 21, fresh out of school.

"Do you have any news for me?" The director inquired, stepping between two researchers and putting a set of headphones over his ears, listening to the communication from the agents in the Upside Down.

"Nothing yet, sir," The young scientist replied, his voice wavering with nervousness. "Just collecting additional samples for testing,"

"Wonderful," The director said pleasantly, setting the headphones back down on the control table. "Keep me informed of your findings,"

"The older researcher nodded in a show of respect. "We will, Dr. Brenner,"

.

"Whatever you do, I'll be two steps behind you. Wherever you go, and I'll be there to remind you..."

21. Wind of Change

[A/N: Hey y'all! :) I feel like this story is going to have a million chapters because every time I lay out a plan for a chapter, there are just a few notes for what will happen and then all of a sudden there's 5,000 words and I need to cut it off before it gets too crazy long haha. I'm working on finishing an outline for the remaining chapters but like I said, I think we're only like, halfway through this story right now haha. Anyway, thanks for sticking around and reading! I hope you're still enjoying it! There's plenty more to come. :)]

Chapter 21: Wind of Change (by Scorpions)

"Take me to the magic of the moment on a glory night, where the children of tomorrow share their dreams..."

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The wind was particularly strong that night and each heavy gust whistled loudly as it blew across El's window. The room was dark and the clock Becky had put on the small table by El's bed said 3:13.

The day had been surprisingly interesting. After initially meeting the girls in her neighborhood, they'd been abruptly called away by Gabby's dad but they'd promised they would hang out with her tomorrow. It was a strange feeling to hear them make a promise to her. They'd just met and already they could give her something that could never be broken? She deduced that these girls must have trusted her a lot already to do that. And if friends typically made promises, did that make them her friends? They'd barely interacted before being called away. The whole thing seemed odd but El didn't mind the idea of more friends. She was wary, of course, but she was also quite lonely.

As the digits on the clock changed with each passing minute, an idea popped into El's mind.

"Three... one... five..." She murmured to herself before throwing the quilt off of her and digging through her bags, finally retrieving the

Supercom Mike had gifted her. He hadn't showed her how to use it properly yet but she honestly didn't really need to know anyway.

As she turned the walkie talkie on, she wondered if Mike would mind her talking to him so late at night or if he'd even hear his walkie talkie. The idea wasn't enough to deter her, however, and she sat cross-legged on her bedroom floor, the hardwood floor uncomfortable to her bony behind, as she sat the Supercom in front of her and focused. Her eyes closed and she thought of Mike, his dark, mopy hair and the little brown spots on his face. She thought of his house and his room and the way his voice went up and down sometimes without him trying. It didn't take long before the connection was established and she whispered his name gently, "*Mike?*"

She paused, listening intently for a response while also keeping an ear out for any noise in the hall. She didn't want to wake Becky or Terry. "*Mike?*" She tried again and waited.

She was about to give up when the Supercom crackled and Mike's groggy but happy voice came through. "El? Is that you? Over,"

"Yes," She said simply.

"Is everything okay?" Mike asked through a yawn. "It's really late,"

"Can't sleep," El said quietly.

"Oh," Mike said knowingly and the sound of his voice was like a warm blanket wrapped around her shoulders. "That's okay. That happens to me sometimes, too. Did you try counting sheep?"

"Counting... sheep?" El asked, her eyebrow quirked in confusion, though he couldn't see that.

"Yeah," He yawned again. "Um, sometimes people imagine sheep jumping over a fence or something or in a barn and they count them,"

El considered this for a moment, balancing her conversation with the effort it took to maintain their connection. "What is a 'barn'?" She inquired thoughtfully.

"It's a house for animals on a -," Mike cut himself off, knowing she

was probably going to ask him what a 'farm' was if he mentioned it. "Nevermind, it's not important," He yawned again. "Sorry, over"

El sat quietly, content to hear him talk as she wiped away the trickle of blood running from her nose. She wouldn't be able to keep this up much longer but on the bright side, she may be able to sleep better.

"So how is um, living with Becky?" Mike asked after El had been quiet for a moment.

El thought for a moment. So far Becky seemed nice. She still wasn't sure what to think about Terry but her energy was quickly draining. "Good," She replied, then remembered the girls she had met earlier that day. "New friends,"

Mike's surprise was noticeable in his voice, though he hid the tinge of disappointment. "Oh yeah?" He said. "That was fast. Um, what are they like?"

"Nice," She replied softly, her eyelids feeling heavy. "Tired,"

"They're tired?" Mike asked, confused.

El shook her head and the movement made her dizzy. "No,"

Thankfully, Mike usually had a pretty good sense of El's communication style. "Oh, you mean *you're* tired," He said. "Well -"

Mike's bedroom door opened abruptly and the bright hall light assaulted his eyes.

"*Michael!*" Karen stood in the doorway, her pale pink robe wrapped around her and a disapproving hand on her hip. The yellow light shining from behind her silhouette made it difficult to see her face but Mike knew she was pissed. "Turn that thing off and *go to sleep!*"

She didn't wait for him to respond before shutting the door behind her and heading back to her own room next door.

"Angry?" El's wavering voice questioned.

"Yeah," Mike sighed, then added in a hushed tone, "She heard us

talking and I'm supposed to be asleep. I'll talk to you tomorrow, though. Okay, El?"

El nodded, then added a beat later, "Okay," Talking this way made it difficult for her to maintain her non-verbal way of communicating.

"Night, El," Mike said with a smile.

El yawned, wiping another streak of blood from her nose as the connection faded with her exhaustion. "Night, Mike,"

.....

El woke up late the following morning, her stomach rumbling and gnawing at itself with hunger. As she trudged down the stairs, wiping the sleep from her eyes, she could hear the sound of the TV in the living room. Still wanting to avoid Terry, she quickly darted into the kitchen. She paused at the fridge, sizing it up before opening it and immediately becoming overwhelmed. There was so much stuff crammed into such a small space, El wasn't sure where to start. There were numerous packages and cartons she didn't recognize, along with plastic containers with other unidentified food items. The freezer did little to help, as well. Still no Eggos and several frozen packages of meat that she had no idea what to do with. On the door of the fridge, she recognized a bottle she'd seen at Mike's house, identifying the liquid inside as "orange juice" and pulled the carton out.

At Mike's house, they'd poured the juice into glasses so El began her search for one of her own. There were several cabinets that hung above the countertops, just out of El's reach. As she struggled on her tip-toes to open one of the cabinets, she let out a frustrated sigh, double-checking that no one was coming. She exhaled, focusing her mental energy on the cabinets, the orange juice carton tucked safely under her arm, as every cabinet door opened at once with a quick swing. The glasses were in a cabinet above the sink and just as El was about to use her powers to retrieve one, a soft voice from behind startled her.

"Do you... need some help, sweetie?" El turned around to find Rose looking from her to the array of open cabinets with a combination of confusion and relentless pleasantness.

El pursed her lips, then nodded. "Juice," She gestured with the carton under her arm.

Rose walked over to the cabinet, effortlessly pulling down a glass as El handed her the carton of juice.

"Your aunt went to the grocery store while you were sleeping," Rose said as she poured the beverage into the glass. "She should be back soon but I think you need more of a breakfast than just some juice, don't you think?"

El looked down, giving a gentle nod. She was still a bit nervous around new people and she hadn't interacted with Rose very much. Still, the woman seemed nice.

"Go ahead into the living room," Rose instructed as she began to scrub out a frying pan. "You can watch TV and I'll bring you your breakfast,"

El hesitated, looking from Rose to the living room doorway and back again before finally deciding to oblige, reluctant though she was.

Terry was seated in her usual chair, facing the TV, and El hung in the doorway like a shadow, observing. She wasn't sure what to make of this woman. As she understood it, she was supposed to feel good things around her. This was her "mom". But after their encounter the other night, El was even more nervous to be around her than she'd been before. That strange sensation and the voice that appeared in her head without her trying had been unnerving to say the least and she couldn't help but wonder if it had been Terry's doing. Her fear paralyzed her while her curiosity compelled her, causing a consistent friction between what she wanted to do and what frightened her.

I know you're there.

The voice in her head almost made her shriek and El clamped her hands over her ears instinctively. The calm and soothing warmth of its tone did nothing to keep her from being startled. Strangely, Terry hadn't moved an inch as El did everything she could to keep from screaming as her adrenaline thumped through her veins with the pounding of her heart.

Don't be afraid.

El looked around, wondering for a moment if Rose had come out of the kitchen and was talking to her, but she could hear pans clattering on the stovetop and knew she and Terry were alone.

Come sit.

As much as she wanted to run out of the house or crawl up into a ball on the floor and cry, El couldn't help the magnetic fascination that tethered her to this woman. She cautiously approached Terry's sitting form, eyes wide and movements slow with trepidation. Terry never moved as El got closer, finally coming in view of the woman. There was an ottoman next to Terry's rocking chair and El stared at it for a few moments before bravely sitting down, her muscles tight and her breathing shallow. She didn't know what was going on but as much as she was frightened, she wanted to understand.

Close your eyes. The voice was gentle and warm, tickling El's mind with the soft curl of its words. *Find me.*

El hesitated, looking at the woman as if at any moment she would begin to move and talk like a normal person. But in the short few days she'd been here, she knew that wasn't going to happen. El inhaled deeply, exhaling as she closed her eyes and tried to focus. She wasn't sure what to do or to what degree she was the one "doing" anything in this situation. Normally when she "found" people, it was in the bath. There was no tank or tub here but she did as the voice instructed regardless.

As El focused her attention and energy on the voice, recalling its warmth and softness, she quickly found herself in a familiar place. The darkness, she'd called it. Her bare feet sloshed in the shallow water that covered the floor of the otherwise empty space. She began to breathe heavily, frightened that she was here without going into the bath. If there wasn't a tank to come out of, how would she escape? As she looked around nervously, she noticed a woman standing before her in a long blue nightgown. This woman, Terry, had a light in her eyes that El had never seen before and her smile was foreign to her as well.

Hello Jane.

El stared at Terry in wonder before dumbly pointing to herself and murmuring, "El,"

El. Terry said with a breath, feeling the syllable roll over her tongue. My beautiful daughter.

El stood stock still, unsure what to make of this experience. For as much as she had learned of her powers and abilities in the lab and outside of it, she'd never experienced something like this. Did this mean Terry had powers, too?

"How?" El asked.

You're very special, El. Terry smiled sadly. I'm so sorry that I lost you.

El looked down as the image of Terry screaming from a hospital bed as Papa walked away, a baby cradled in his arms, flashed across her memory. The realization that *she* was the baby felt like a veil lifting from her eyes. Things were quite suddenly beginning to make so much sense. If she was the baby being taken away from Terry then... perhaps Papa wasn't her *real* Papa... He'd *stolen* her. The thought brought bile up to the back of El's throat and her eyes pricked with tears.

The bond between a mother and her baby can never be broken. Terry explained. I've waited for you all this time. Terry stepped closer and El fought the urge to back away as Terry's hand reached for her. *No matter what happens to me, you can always find me here.* Terry's fingertips gently grazed El's cheek and she was struck with a sudden, powerful sensation that welled up in her chest like a geyser. She wasn't sure what it was or what it meant but she simultaneously wanted to cry and hug this woman at the same time.

"Breakfast is ready!" Rose's sing-song voice echoing down the hall startled El out of her focus and her face briefly crumpled at the disruption. When she looked up at Terry from her place on the ottoman, the woman's empty eyes were staring blankly at the television and El fought the urge to cry. She didn't understand why but it felt like losing her mother for the very first time.

.....

Will was seated at the kitchen table, his social studies homework spread out in front of him. He hadn't gotten much sleep the night before so it'd been a long day at school, trying to stay awake and alert despite the frequent pull of his eyelids. Even now, he had to prop his head up in his hand lest he give in to the idea of resting his head on the table and taking a nap.

Despite a few twinges of nausea here and there, Will had been feeling much better than he had since returning from the Upside Down. He hadn't seen a slug in almost a week and he'd only flickered into the Upside Down once on his way home from school when his bike tire momentarily lost traction over some sticks in the road. It seemed he wouldn't have to worry his mom or Jonathan after all, which was a relief considering everything that had been going on lately.

Jonathan had stayed after school for a bit to develop some photos and Joyce was busily bustling around the house getting ready for work.

"God, this piece of crap," Joyce muttered to herself, checking for the third time if her curling iron had heated up yet as a lit cigarette dangled from her mouth. "Will, honey!" She called from the bathroom. "What time did Jonathan say he'd be back?"

Will looked at the kitchen clock. "He should be home in a few minutes!" Will called out as he began to doodle on the corner of his homework. "He said he'd be back by 4!"

Suddenly, the lights in the kitchen flickered and for a split second, Will thought his heart had actually stopped beating. The last time that had happened, the Demogorgon wasn't far. This time, however, the lights flickered and went off throughout the house and Joyce let out an angry groan from the bathroom.

"Dammit!" Will heard something plastic bang against the sink and Joyce came storming out, her hair half-curled and her brow furrowed deeply as she made a beeline for the phone on the wall.

"What's going on?" Will asked, pausing his homework completion

though it was still light enough outside to see his worksheet.

"The damn electric company shut us off," Joyce blustered as she waited for someone to answer, the receiver pressed to her ear and her fingers tapping against the wall impatiently. "I sent them a payment a week ago!" She grumbled more to herself than to Will, then realizing how she must have been coming across, she softened her tone, "Don't worry, sweetie. They probably just turned us off by mistake,"

"It's fine," Will shrugged, more concerned by his mother's stress than the lack of light. As Joyce struggled to maintain a polite tone with whoever answered the phone, Will couldn't help but be thankful that his issues with those slugs and the Upside Down seemed to finally be over. The last thing his family needed right now was more stress.

.....

Despite how much El appreciated the big, fluffy waffles that Becky made, she couldn't help but be delighted when Becky came home from grocery shopping with a box of Eggos. They reminded her of Mike and she had insisted on having some for a snack later that afternoon. She'd just finished eating when a knock on the front door echoed through the first floor of the house. El's instinctive reaction was to cower and hide but she peered around the kitchen doorway to watch Becky answer the door.

"Hi!" Gabby's bright red hair was the first thing El noticed and she couldn't help the tiny smile that escaped. "I'm Gabby. Is El home?"

"Can she come out?" El recognized Trish's voice and slowly slipped out from hiding behind the wall. Emma quietly hung back behind Gabby and Trish.

Becky turned, eyebrows raised at her niece. "I guess you're making friends already?"

El pursed her lips in an effort to keep from smiling too broadly at that comment. She was making friends.

"Do you want to come over my house?" Gabby asked El, then looked to Becky for approval. "I just live a few houses down," She gestured in

the general direction of her house.

"What do you think, El?" Becky looked to her niece, uncertain as to how to navigate this new territory. While she wanted to protect El, she also knew she couldn't keep her on house arrest. How would they find that balance?

El looked to the girls, their faces eager as they waited in the doorway, then nodded.

"Okay," Becky nodded, her nerves tingling with anxiety as she thought on her feet. "Okay, um," She began to unlatch the watch from her wrist. "Take this. I want you to come back at 6 o' clock, okay?"

El stared in confusion at the watch as Becky latched it to her tiny wrist. This one looked different than Mike's and she wasn't sure what "6 o' clock" meant. There were two little sticks pointing in different directions and a third that she could see moving around the clock's face in a circle.

"When the longer one is on the twelve and the shorter one is on the six," Becky whispered into El's ear discreetly.

That made more sense and El nodded before walking outside and following the girls to Gabby's house.

The house was laid out similarly to Becky's house with only small differences in detail and Gabby immediately led the girls up to her room. As Gabby closed the door behind them, El couldn't help but compare the bedroom to Nancy's. There were pictures everywhere and El recognized many of them included Gabby and one or both of the other girls. The walls were a pale shade of pink and purple star stickers were clustered together in one corner. A thin white curtain covered the single window and the blanket on Gabby's bed had horses all over it. Much to El's surprise, there was a small TV in one corner and another unfamiliar object on the other side of the room.

For a while, El sat and observed the interactions of the other girls. While she'd spent time with Nancy, she'd had very little exposure to the interactions between girls her own age. The most she'd been able to witness had been girls at the middle school in Hawkins but even

then, she hadn't been *with* them. She'd been walking around with the boys and hadn't been able to hear the conversations those girls were having. She'd always wondered what other girls her age talked about? She quickly learned they did not talk about Dungeons and Dragons, Star Wars, or Lord of the Rings, the latter of which she still did not know anything about. Instead, they seemed to giggle a lot and mentioned several boys' names but El had trouble keeping up - the conversation moved so quickly! She could barely keep track of the questions as they rolled around in her head. What was a 'crush'? Who was 'mascara'? What was an 'MTV'?

"El, you're super quiet," Trish finally commented, startling El out of her mental list-making. "Are you okay?"

With the other girls' eyes on her, El carefully nodded. "Okay,"

"Guys," Gabby suddenly stood up from her spot on the bed. "Have you heard Madonna's new album?" El watched curiously as she walked over to the strange object in the corner and adjusted some of the knobs on the front, filling the room with music that made El want to bounce. "I can't stop listening to this song!" Gabby began to sway animatedly, flipping her auburn locks around as she dramatically acted out the words to the song. "*Get into the groove, boy, you've got to prove your love to me, yeah!*"

Trish nudged El's shoulder. "Gabby can be a little dramatic when it comes to music," She said under her breath but Gabby still heard her over Madonna's vocals.

"Whatever, Trish," Gabby rolled her eyes, continuing to dance slightly off-beat. "It's my favorite, okay?"

"Favorite?" El looked to Trish.

"Yeah," Gabby noticed El's expression. "My favorite song,"

"What is 'favorite'?" She asked hesitantly. The boys were used to her not knowing words but she wasn't sure how the girls would react to her lack of knowledge.

"You don't know 'favorite' means?" Trish asked, dumbfounded.

El pursed her lips, her cheeks growing hot as she felt the girls' eyes on her.

"Um," Emma spoke from her place on the other side of Gabby's bed. "Favorite means you think something is the best. Like, okay, Gabby's favorite song is 'Into the Groove' so she thinks that's the best song out of all the songs she knows," She paused. "Get it?"

"I like it the most," Gabby clarified and El nodded, seemingly satisfied with this explanation. "Hey uh, where are you from that you don't know the word 'favorite', El?"

El blinked, digging through her memory to retrieve that place the boys had described once before. "Sweden,"

Trish did a double-take. "Seriously?"

El shrugged and nodded at the same time, her expression uncertain.

"Wow," Gabby breathed, sitting back down on the bed. "That's wild. So like, what's it like over there? Is everybody the same as they are here?"

"Um," El paused. "Cold,"

"Ha, I bet," Trish guffawed.

"So how come you don't go to school with us?" Gabby asked, pulling her legs into a criss-cross position. "Are you home-schooled or something?"

El considered this for a moment. She did schoolwork at home so that seemed about right. "Yes,"

"Oh my god, she needs to come to the dance with us," Trish suddenly exclaimed, then turned to El who had leaned away a little bit at her outburst. "You need to come to the dance,"

"Dance?" El parroted. She remembered that word. Mike had used it when he was explaining what a "Snowball" was. A *cheesy school dance* he had called it.

"Yeah, it's a Sadie Hawkins dance for Valentine's," Emma added but El's perplexed expression only deepened so she continued, "Normally the boys ask the girls to school dances but for the Sadie Hawkins dance, the girls ask the boys,"

"We usually just go as a group," Trish said with a shrug. "The boys at our school are lame,"

"Yeah, you're not missing much," Gabby said, rolling her eyes.

"Mouthbreathers?" El asked and the girls giggled.

"Sure, you could say that," Trish smirked, then turned to Emma and said in a sing-song voice, "Except for *Joooshuaaaa*,"

"Shut up," Emma muttered, her normally pale cheeks pinkening as Trish and Gabby chuckled and El stared. "I'm not asking him, okay?"

"We've been giving her hell about this all week," Gabby leaned to El and explained. "She has a mega crush on this kid Josh at our school,"

"Crush?" El quirked her head upon hearing the word again. Crushing didn't sound like a good thing. She knew about crushing. She had crushed the brains of the agents who had threatened her friends and countless soda cans during her testing at the lab. Why were they so happy about someone who was crushing someone?

"Wow, you're like an alien," Trish laughed, then patted El's shoulder when she noticed the girl's face fall. "No, it's okay. A crush is like, when you like someone,"

"A friend?" El reasoned but Trish shook her head.

"No, like, someone you *really* like," She said, emphasizing and drawing out her words. "More than a friend,"

"More than a friend," El nodded thoughtfully, considering this. "Okay,"

"Do *you* have a crush, El?" Gabby asked, her face beaming with anticipation and suddenly El felt shy, though she couldn't explain why.

"More than a friend?" She said, hesitating. "Um..." The only person who came to her mind was Mike. He was her friend but when she thought about it, she liked him the most. That probably made him her favorite. And if he was her favorite friend, maybe that meant he was her 'crush'? "Mike,"

"Ooooooooh," Trish and Gabby said in unison, looking at each other in amusement. "Tell us about *Mike*,"

El blinked, unsure of what to say but she didn't need to think long before more questions came.

"What does he look like?"

"Does he live around here?"

"Is he from Sweden, too?"

"Is he cute?"

"Um," El tried to make sense of their questions, organizing her thoughts. What did she think of when she thought of Mike? "Dark hair," She said quietly, barely touching her own head. "Spots," She gestured to Gabby's face and the redhead laughed heartily.

"You mean 'freckles'?" She grinned. "He has freckles?"

"Freckles, yes," El nodded confidently. "Um... not from here,"

"You should bring him to the dance!" Gabby said excitedly, clasping her hands together. "Ahhhhh, this is so romantic. You can bring Mike, Emma's gonna ask Josh -"

"I'm not -" Emma began.

"Whatever, yes you are," Gabby waved away her protest. As she did so, El noticed the sleeve of her shirt fell down a little bit, exposing some of her forearm, and through the space between her arm and the fabric, El could see strange dark spots on her skin.

"Freckles?" El asked, pointing to Gabby's arm and the girl quickly yanked her sleeve down. The entire mood of the room quickly

became heavy and quiet and El wasn't sure what she had done wrong.

"No," Gabby answered curtly and stood up, walking over to the TV and turning it on as her friends quietly watched with pained expressions. El looked between Trish and Emma, then back to Gabby who was quickly flipping through channel after channel.

"Gabby's dad is kind of an asshole," Trish whispered into El's ear. "He got pissed one time and put his cigarette out on her arm,"

"A few times," Emma added quietly.

"I can hear you," Gabby grumbled, leaving the TV on MTV as a music video for Prince began.

Trish pursed her lips and El wished this uncomfortable feeling would go away. Despite her ever-present confusion, she'd been having a good time with her new friends and she felt bad for making her new friend upset. She felt even worse knowing that Gabby had a dad who hurt her. That was certainly something she could relate to.

El stood up and walked over to where Gabby was crouched in front of the TV, gingerly resting her hand on Gabby's shoulder. "Sorry," She said softly. "I understand,"

The tension in Gabby's shoulders and back released and she sighed. "It's fine," She said without looking up. "Hey uh," She cleared her throat and forced her voice back to normal. As she stood back up, El let her hand fall to her side. "Have you ever watched MTV? They've got all the music videos you could imagine,"

.....

The rest of the week seemed to fly by. El spent the mornings reviewing her schoolwork and chatting with Becky and Rose. She hadn't had another opportunity to communicate with Terry in the darkness, though. She didn't want to do it in front of Becky or Rose and since that initial time, she hadn't had another moment in which she and her mom were actually alone. She was happy when Gabby, Trish, and Emma invited her to hang out with them again each day

after school. She was getting a lot of information very quickly that she was still trying to work her way through but so far, she had decided that she liked MTV, she definitely thought Emma should go with Joshua to the dance, and she was afraid of Gabby's father. Thankfully, her dad was never home when she went over to their house because he worked until evening and El always went back home before he got there. Trish and Emma didn't seem too worried though which seemed odd but maybe they were just used to knowing about Gabby's dad. In the evenings after dinner, El would sneak up to her room and sit in her closet, using the supercom to talk to Mike and fill him in on her day. There never seemed to be enough time, though, before his mom insisted he work on his homework or help with dishes and sometimes Becky would interrupt them just because she wanted to know where El was. She seemed a little anxious and a little overprotective sometimes and El couldn't decide if she liked it or not.

El spent Friday excitedly waiting for Hopper to come pick her up. He'd called the night before to let her know to be ready by 2 pm, that way they could swing by the school and pick up Mike. Earlier that week, Hopper had run into Karen at the library. As she was returning books she'd rented for Holly, he was scouring the educational section for appropriate resources for El. After some small talk, Karen had offered to help with El's schooling, citing the fact that she had studied a little bit of child development in high school and had plenty of time since she was usually home with Holly. She just couldn't shake the sympathy she felt for El and the things she had gone through - what she knew of them, at least - and wanted to do her part to help the girl. The new plan was for El to be picked up by Hopper on Friday's and unless something else was going on, she would go to the Wheeler's house for the evening. Karen would help her with schoolwork while Mike did his own homework and then she could spend the rest of the day with her friends. Saturday was largely reserved for schooling with Hopper and Sundays were a freebie.

As Hopper and El drove back to Hawkins, El couldn't help the bubble of excitement that bounced around in her stomach at the thought of seeing her friends again. Especially Mike.

.....

The locker room always smelled awful after gym class and Mike was glad that it was his last class of the day. The teacher had asked him to help put away the equipment for the day and so Mike was the last to get back to the locker room to change. After washing the dirt and dust from his hands and changing into his regular clothes, Mike began to make his way through the maze of lockers to the exit when he was stopped by Troy standing in the doorway.

"Where ya goin', Frogface?" He said menacingly and Mike rolled his eyes, moving to pass him but James appeared and further blocked his way.

"C'mon, Troy," Mike sighed in exasperation, rolling his eyes. "The bell already rang,"

"Oh, *the bell rang*," Troy mimicked obnoxiously and James smirked, crossing his arms.

"What do you want?" Mike asked, his expression beyond annoyed as he tried to squeeze past them to no avail.

"Do you... do you want to leave, Wheeler?" Troy asked, pretending to just become aware of this. "Uh, yeah," Mike replied sarcastically. "Can you move?"

Troy's eyes darkened. "How about you make me?" He said, shoving Mike just hard enough to set him off balance. "You know, we never finished this conversation the other day,"

"Cut it out, Troy," Mike growled and steadied himself but the weight of his backpack made it easy for James to reach out and grab him, further pulling him off balance. As Mike stumbled, Troy grabbed him by the straps of his backpack and shoved him into a row of blue lockers. The metal clanged loudly with the impact and Mike's supercom dug into his back through the backpack's fabric.

"Let me go!" Mike yelled angrily, struggling as James immobilized him, weaving his arms through Mike's so that he couldn't defend himself or get away. Mike clenched his eyes tight as Troy's fist came flying toward him.

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"The wind of change blows straight into the face of time, like a stormwind that will ring the freedom bell..."

22. All Out Of Love

[A/N: Heyyyy, look at that! A new chapter lol Ahhhh, you guys I have so much to do. This semester is so crazy. I'm starting a stress management counseling group tomorrow at my internship so wish me luck!

Anywho, I'm glad you guys are liking the route this story is taking! I appreciate your reviews so much and it always brings a smile to my face to see your comments! :) So thank you!]

Chapter 22: All Out Of Love (by Air Supply)

"I wish I could carry your smile in my heart for times when my life seems so low. It would make me believe what tomorrow could bring when today doesn't really know..."

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"God, what's taking him so long," Dustin grumbled impatiently as he, Will, and Lucas waited in the main lobby for Mike.

"Do you think we should go look for him?" Will wondered aloud, peering down the emptying hall as a few remaining students scurried past, eager to get home.

"I'm sure he's fine," Lucas said dismissively. "Sanders always makes Mike help put the cones and shit away because he knows Mike won't say no,"

It was at that moment that Mike finally came trudging around the corner and his friends immediately noticed that he was not okay. He was hunched over the slightest bit and his walk seemed laborious, however, his face was the most noticeably awry aspect of his appearance. There was a small cut at his eyebrow and the area surrounding his left eye was already puffy and turning purple. His lip was also swollen and split down the middle. He winced as he walked and his eyebrows stitched together in an angry scowl.

"What the hell?!" Dustin exclaimed as they ran up to meet Mike

halfway down the hallway. "Dude, what happened?"

"I bet it was Troy," Lucas spat, glowering.

"I don't wanna talk about it," Mike said seethingly, his speech slightly off due to his swollen lip.

"Give him a hand, guys," Dustin instructed as he helped support his friend on one side and Lucas on the other. Will took Mike's backpack so he didn't have to carry the extra weight and the four of them plodded down the hall and outside.

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Mike knew that El and Hopper were picking him up from school today. She'd talked to him over the supercom the night before after Hopper had informed her of the new arrangement and he'd seemed excited. That's why El couldn't understand why he still hadn't come outside, even though most of the other students had already gone home. Even the buses had left already and only a few students milled about, chatting lazily amongst themselves.

El watched the main doors of the school with an eagle-like intensity. As her friends clumsily made their way through one of the doors, huddled together for some odd reason, she quirked her head in confusion until she saw Mike's face.

"What the hell?" Hopper seemed to notice as well but El was already climbing out of the SUV and running up to the boys as they escorted him to the pick-up lane.

"What happened?" El asked, already feeling anger spread through her veins the way food coloring spreads through a glass of water.

"Nothing," Mike quickly answered without looking at her and the boys continued to help him to the car.

El looked between the boys' faces, then back at Mike who was staring straight ahead, as if Hopper's SUV was the only thing he could see. He tried to shrug off his friends' support but they still stood close to him, ready to spot him if he took a misstep.

"Friends don't lie..." El said softly but firmly. She followed after them, trying to make eye contact and get answers but none of them wanted to speak and she didn't understand why.

"Friends also give each other space when they *don't* want to talk about something," Mike said irritably, wincing as he wrenched himself away from Lucas' steadying hand.

"Mike," Dustin scolded gently, looking sympathetically at El whose face was still contorted in a combination of confusion, hurt, and galvanized anger on his behalf.

"What the hell happened to you?" Hopper questioned as he got out of the car and Mike groaned.

"Can we just go home?" Mike pleaded. "I just - ugh..."

El's brow furrowed. She had a pretty good idea of who had done this, even if Mike refused to talk about it. Turning on her heel, she strode purposefully into the school.

"El, wait!" Mike yelled after her, recognizing the flash in her eyes. "Don't!"

Dustin moved to go after her but suddenly, he couldn't move his legs and he was frozen in place. "Goddammit!" He grumbled, rolling his eyes as El disappeared into the school and stumbling when she released her hold on him.

"It was Troy, wasn't it," Lucas surmised and Mike flashed an angry look of betrayal at him.

"Lucas!"

"Come on, Mike!" Lucas threw up his hands wildly. "They can't just get away with this shit,"

"Troy?" Hopper looked at Mike, then Lucas. "Troy *who*?"

"Harrington," Dustin supplied, catching an indignant look from Mike who then groaned, glowering at the pavement.

"You," Hopper said to Mike in a stern voice. "You sit in the car and wait until I get back,"

"What?" Mike exclaimed. "No, I'm fine!"

"Now," Hopper said firmly, deepening his tone and staring down at the young boy who reluctantly obliged. "You three..." He sighed in exasperation. "Go find El. I'm gonna talk to the principal,"

"*What?!*" Mike shrieked from the backseat, leaning out the door. "No! That's just gonna make things worse. Can you *not?*"

"I'll be damned if I drop you off at home, looking like *that*," He gestured to Mike's face and the boy frowned stubbornly. "And can't tell your mom that I did something about it," Mike huffed bitterly, throwing himself dramatically against the back-seat cushion and fighting the urge to wince in pain as he did so. Hopper checked that Mike's feet were clear of the door and slammed it shut, giving Mike a final look before heading into the school.

As Mike watched him go, he groaned miserably. Between the dull, throbbing pain of his injuries, the red-hot embarrassment of having been beat up, and the anxiety of knowing that the chief of police was about to go in and report the incident to the principal, he couldn't imagine things could possibly get much worse.

.....

She only vaguely remembered her way around the school but she didn't care. There weren't as many people in the school now so she wasn't sure if she'd find him but her blood still boiled in anticipation. She'd almost thought she'd missed them when she noticed Troy and James at the very end of a long hallway, laughing as they made their way to another exit. El's eyes narrowed with intense focus as she pinned the boys in place, paying little mind to the way they yelled in confusion.

"*What the hell?!*"

With a confident pace, she walked down the hallway toward them, giving herself time to decide what she was going to do. She hadn't

thought this through but as she approached the boys, she realized she couldn't bring too much attention to herself. She was supposed to be in hiding, after all.

Their backs were to her as she finally reached them and she took slow steps around them, finally coming into their line of vision and reveling in the way their pupils dilated with fear.

Troy started to speak but El tightened his throat ever so slightly, enough to make him uncomfortable and unable to talk as he panicked at the reduced air flow. James remained silent, eyes darting anxiously between Troy and El.

"Hurt Mike," El accused, the words like poison dripping from her lips as she brought her face mere inches from Troy's. Her eyes shot daggers and he couldn't hold her gaze, darting his eyes in every direction but at her as he coughed against the pressure at his throat.

"Please don't hurt us," James squeaked and El shot a glare at him, promptly shutting him up.

"No more," El warned, her voice low and gravely as a thin trickle of blood began to leak from her nostril. "Understand?" She tightened her grip on Troy's throat for emphasis and his eyes bulged with panic as he coughed and sputtered against the invisible pressure. "*Understand?*"

Troy and James nodded emphatically and El released her grip on Troy's throat, watching as he inhaled deep, haggard breaths.

She had been content to leave after that until she heard Troy mutter "*Crazy bitch,*" under his breath. She surveyed the empty hall that had temporarily emptied completely. Taking advantage of the brief lack of witnesses, she threw Troy across the floor, never even looking back as his back slammed into the concrete wall.

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By the time Dustin, Lucas, and Will found El, she was walking nonchalantly down the hallway toward them as Troy and James groaned in pain on the floor at the other end of hall.

"C'mon, El," Dustin said, unable to hide his toothy grin. "We've gotta get outta here,"

"What did you do to them?" Will asked in impressed amazement.

"Who cares?" Lucas retorted. "They deserved it,"

For as good as El felt about her interaction with Troy and James, her mood shifted considerably on the car ride home. Hopper came back to the SUV shortly after she did. From her place in the front seat, she could see vaguely see Mike through the side door mirror and he looked miserable and angry, so much so that she was almost afraid to approach or speak to him.

The ride to Mike's house had been silent, sans Hopper recounting his discussion with the principal who had promised to follow up with Troy and "get to the bottom of it", all the while expressing his perception of the principal being incompetent. Neither El nor Mike were listening, however. El couldn't stop wondering if Mike was okay and what she could do to make him feel better. Mike was fixated on what Monday would bring and whether he'd have even more of a target on his back now that Hopper had reported Troy to the principal. He didn't even want to think about what El might have done when she'd gone into the school. As much as he appreciated her trying to protect him, it did nothing to help his embarrassment, especially when he'd been getting teased for months about how he couldn't protect himself without El around. Then lo and behold, he gets beat up and it's El to the rescue. If it was possible for the ground to swallow him up whole, he didn't think that would be so bad right about now.

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Nancy wasn't terribly interested in basketball but Steve had managed to convince her to come out and see the first home game of the season anyway. The metal stands were cold, despite being indoors, and Nancy could hardly pay attention to the game because Steve's friends, Dave and Lauren, wouldn't stop talking. After everything that had transpired that fall, Steve had cut pretty much all ties with Tommy and Carol, however, his new friends weren't any less obnoxious. While she could admit they weren't as awful as their

predecessors, Nancy still wasn't enthused by their company.

"Why don't you get us some sodas, babe?" Dave said cockily, his arm draped across Lauren's shoulders.

"Get 'em yourself," She scoffed with a laugh. "Oh hey," She pointed to another girl a few rows down from them. "Check out Bessie down there," She laughed snottily.

"Oh damn," Dave remarked with a grin, sitting up. "She's gonna bring this whole thing down," He laughed, grabbing his seat and shaking it for the effect.

Lauren laughed as the metal squeaked and Nancy watched in dismay as Steve smirked at their antics.

"Hey," Dave nudged his girlfriend. "Who does she remind you of?" He grinned. "Those glasses, the shirt,"

"Oh my god," Lauren cackled and Nancy grimaced. "She's a Barb clone!"

Nancy glared into her lap as they laughed, waiting for Steve to say something but he never did.

"God, if I looked like that, I think I'd run away, too," Lauren remarked and Nancy stood up, fuming.

"Hey, where are you going?" Steve grabbed her hand.

Nancy just shook her head, her eyebrows furrowed with anger as she fought with every fiber of her being to keep from crying in front of all these people in the stands.

"Nance, c'mon," Steve pleaded gently. "Guys," He directed his attention to Dave and Lauren. "Not cool,"

"Aw shit," Dave said as realization dawned over his face, despite his unfading grin.

"We forgot you were friends with her," Lauren snickered and her fake smile made Nancy feel sick. "We'll stop,"

"I'm gonna go," Nancy said in a low tone, speaking directly to Steve and ignoring the couple beside them.

"Nance, stop," Steve tried to persuade her but she brushed past him, steadily making her way across the row. "Nancy!"

She'd barely pushed her way through the double doors of the gym before tears exploded from her eyes, rushing down her face like a river that had broken through its dam. She dragged sputtering breaths into her lungs as she jogged down the hall and made her way outside, slipping behind the wall and out of sight. Alone, she let her sobs come freely, leaning back against the brick wall of the school building as tears blurred her vision. She didn't care about the cold or the fact that her coat was still in her locker. She felt paralyzed by the pain in her chest and was thinking of nothing else as she sank down to the cold, damp ground, wrapping her arms around her legs and burying her face into her knees.

"Nancy?" A tentative, soft voice startled her and she looked up to see Jonathan Byers standing over her, the new camera she and Steve had bought him hanging from his neck. "Um, are you okay?"

She thought about responding and telling him she was fine but she obviously wasn't. Instead, she simply buried her face in her knees once more, ignoring his question.

"Hey," Jonathan said gently, bringing himself to sit beside her. Though she never looked up, she could tell he was close and despite her conflicting feelings over the past few months, her current state of mind didn't allow her to think about it. "Hey, it's okay," He said, shifting his camera to his side and leaning closer to her.

"It's *not* okay!" Nancy exclaimed, causing Jonathan to jump back slightly. "Barb's *gone* and no one *knows* it. Not even her *parents*!" She blubbered and Jonathan looked solemnly down at the sparse patches of grass on which they sat. "It's just me and I can't even *talk* to *anyone* about it because it's a big *secret* but..." She trailed off as another round of tears slid down her face. Shaking her head, she buried her face in her hands.

"What about Steve?" Jonathan asked hesitantly but judging by the

way Nancy glared into the distance, he could tell that wasn't an option. "Um..." He hesitated, picking at a blade of grass beside him. "You can talk to me,"

Nancy glanced at him, her brow softening, and she bit her lip as she looked down. Tears hung from her eyelashes and Jonathan couldn't help but notice how long and expressive they were. Had she not been in such an emotional state, he would've been tempted to photograph her and capture her beauty in that moment.

Clearing his throat, and his mind of these thoughts, he spoke carefully. "My grandma and I were really close," He said and Nancy listened quietly. "Um, she was my dad's mom, believe it or not," He moved from fidgeting with the grass to curling loose strands of denim that hung from a tear in his jeans. "Lonnie's an asshole but Nana was... I dunno, she was great,"

"*Nana*?" Nancy looked up at him with a half-smile, her tears finally subsiding.

"Yes, '*Nana*'," Jonathan grinned at her. "Anyway, um, this was before my parents split up so she was kind of like this, pillar of stability since mom and Lonnie were always fighting,"

Jonathan paused, his eyebrows fixed as he stared at the dirt in front of him.

"What happened?" Nancy asked gently after a moment had passed.

"She um..." Jonathan paused again and Nancy could tell this wasn't easy for him. "Her kidneys shut down," Nancy's face crumpled with sympathy as he continued. "It was during the divorce. Will and I were staying at her house while they were at court and uh, she said she wasn't feeling well," He inhaled deeply, exhaling slowly. "I was only 11 at the time and Will was like, 6 or 7," He looked up at the fields where they could see several students crossing in the distance. "She went to lay down but when I checked on her, she... um... she was sweating and just, didn't sound right," He continued, the memory flashing vividly across his memory as if it had just happened. "I didn't know what to do so I called 9-1-1 and they came and picked her up," He recalled. "She was crying the whole time they moved her onto the

stretcher and um... and Will was a mess so I took him into the spare bedroom and I think we looked through one of his D&D books or something... I don't remember that part but I was trying to distract him," Nancy pursed her lips as she listened, staring at the ground between them. "We could still hear her though," He breathed, the sound of her cries of pain echoing in his memory. "They brought us to the hospital and we had to wait in the waiting room until our parents got back from court. The doctors said she had sepsis and everything was shutting down," The strands of denim he'd been curling finally ripped from his jeans and he rolled the string between his thumb and index finger. "She died a week later,"

"Wow," Nancy said, exhaling. "I um... I had no idea,"

"I know," He said and when Nancy finally looked up at him, she noticed the glassy look to his eyes and the tear that beaded in the corner. "I um, if you... so if you ever wanna talk about, you know, Barb... "

Nancy nodded quickly. "Thanks,"

He glanced up at her, catching her gaze as a small smile formed on her lips.

"Sure," He nodded, mirroring her expression as he looked back down shyly.

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Flashback

Waiting was the worst part, though he did his best to conceal his feelings in front of her. As he read her favorite book for what felt like the millionth time, his suit jacket lay neatly across one of the chairs on the other side of the room. His wife sat on the other side of the bed, clutching their daughter's hand in hers as she listened. She also had to pretend to be stronger than she felt. He had still been dressed in a suit and tie, having just come from the station, when he arrived at the hospital.

He had quickly made his way to the position of lead detective in the Indianapolis Police Department's homicide unit. Now, with everything

going on with his family, he wished he had a job that required less of his time away from home. His captain had been supportive after they'd learned of Sarah's diagnosis but he still felt the pressure to be there more than he was.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hopper?" The doctor gently rapped on the doorframe, disrupting the story, though any of them could have recited it from memory at this point. "A word?"

"We'll be right back, sweetie," His wife Diane kissed Sarah's forehead and he tucked her stuffed animal closer to her before following the doctor out into the hall.

"Sarah's test results came back," He said grimly once they were a reasonable distance from the door of her room. "I'm afraid they aren't very promising."

"What are we looking at?" Hopper asked, his brow furrowed with determination. In all of his conversations with Diane and Sarah's doctors, he'd clung to the idea that she could pull through this. She was tough. She was a fighter. She'd made it this far and he wouldn't give up on her.

The doctor sighed. "Sarah is not responding to our treatment," He said directly. That was one thing Hopper could respect about this man - he didn't sugar coat anything. Having respect for someone, however, didn't make it any easier to take in the information they provided. "I'm afraid her cancer is rather aggressive and tests indicate that it has metastasized to her brain,"

Diane made a sound that resembled a cross between a gasp and a sob as she threw a hand up to her mouth, tears brimming in her eyes.

"What can we do?" Hopper continued, stubborn as always. He put a comforting arm around his wife's shoulders and she buried her face into his neck.

"I..." The doctor hesitated, his face drawn with sympathy. "I'm afraid we've done all that we can,"

"No," Hopper shook his head. "There's gotta be something else. She's only 6 years old for god's sake - we're not giving up on her now,"

"Jim..." Diane murmured into his skin, shaking her head.

"There's gotta be something," Hopper repeated emphatically. "We'll try anything,"

"There... are experimental procedures being conducted in other facilities; however, I can't guarantee they would be covered by your insurance,"

"That doesn't matter," Hopper shook his head and his wife looked up.

"Jim, how would we -" She started but he cut her off.

"We can make it work," He insisted. "I'll work overtime, we can take out another mortgage,"

"Given the progression of Sarah's condition, I have to be honest when I say that I'm not optimistic," The doctor continued.

"How much time would you say she has?" Diane asked.

"Approximately six months," The doctor replied solemnly.

"I want that contact information," Hopper said. "For the experimental procedures. Who runs it?"

"There are a few facilities," The doctor replied hesitantly. "I can have a nurse bring you a list but I must warn you, the likelihood of her prognosis changing is extremely slim," He looked to Diane who seemed to be accepting the reality more readily than Hopper himself. "I would recommend looking into hospice care and other arrangements as her time gets closer. We can keep her comfortable until that point and but for now, once she's stable, she can go home until -"

"Just get us the information," Hopper demanded, cutting the doctor off.

"O-Okay," The doctor obliged, nodding respectfully to Diane before heading off in the opposite direction.

.....

As expected, Karen had been appalled to see Mike's face when Hopper dropped him and El off at the Wheeler's that afternoon.

"Oh my god, Michael!" She'd exclaimed. "What happened?"

"This kid, Troy at his school," Hopper said as they stepped into the foyer. "Apparently he's been pickin' on him for a while now,"

Mike groaned in frustration before attempting to make a bee-line for the kitchen but his mom caught him by the shoulder.

"Wait," She said, pulling him around to assess his injuries. The area around his eye socket had turned purple and was still a bit swollen. The cut above his eye was crusted with dried blood and had stopped bleeding as had the one on his lip. "How does it feel? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Mom," He replied, wishing he could be anywhere but here. He just wanted to go up to his room or down to the basement and be alone. The fact that El was looking at him with such pity on her face made him feel even smaller than he already felt.

Karen sighed, her eyebrows stitched together with concern. "El, honey, go into the bathroom and get me a damp washcloth,"

El nodded and walked in the direction of the first floor half-bath as Karen called out again.

"Make sure it's warm!"

Hopper filled Karen in on his discussion with the principal and thanked him for taking care of the situation as El returned with the washcloth in hand.

"Here, come in here," Karen escorted the kids into the kitchen where Holly was playing with magnetic letters in front of the refrigerator. "Watch out, sweetie," She gently moved the toddler away from the door as she opened the freezer and retrieved a bag of frozen peas. El offered the washcloth to Mike who reluctantly took it without looking at her and she could feel herself deflate in response to his mood. Wanting to comfort him, she gingerly placed a hand on his back but he shrugged himself away from her contact and the action brought a pang of rejection to her heart.

Karen wiped the blood from Mike's forehead as El watched, then placed the bag of peas against his eye and instructed him to hold it

there while she made lunch for them.

"Can you tell me what happened, sweetheart?" She asked gently as she retrieved a few slices of bread from a bag on the counter. "In your own words? I know what the chief said but I'd like to hear from you,"

"There isn't much to tell," Mike said glumly, resting his elbow on the kitchen table as he balanced his swollen eye against the frozen peas in his hand.

"You can talk to me, Mike," Karen said emphatically, trying to keep her concern under control. She didn't want to overwhelm him. "I had no idea you were being bullied,"

"Ughhhh..." Mike groaned, feeling more and more self-conscious as he could feel El's eyes boring into him and he knew she was feeling nothing but sympathy for him. "It's not a big deal; I can handle it,"

Karen caught herself before she could say what immediately popped into her head. *Apparently not.*

"How long's this been going on?" Karen asked, redirecting her line of questioning.

Mike sighed, tracing designs in the wood of the kitchen table. "I dunno. A long time. He's always been like this," He mumbled, then quickly added, "And not just to me, he does it with Dustin and Lucas and Will, too,"

"I see," Karen hummed, spreading peanut butter onto bread. She could tell by his tone that she wasn't going to get much more out of him now so she decided to save the rest of this conversation for later. "So El," She said, changing the subject. "Do you like grape or strawberry jelly?"

El looked to Mike for an explanation but he was still staring at the table. "Um," She paused. "I don't know..."

"Okay," Karen said cheerily. "Here," She dipped one spoon in a jar of some purple gelatinous substance and another spoon in a red one. "Taste each one and tell me which you want on your sandwich," She smiled as she handed the girl the two spoons and El sampled them

greedily.

"This one," She held up the spoon in her right hand.

"Grape it is, then," Karen took the spoons back and finished preparing their sandwiches.

.....

El had barely focused on her schoolwork. Karen was definitely better at explaining things than Hopper was but El couldn't keep her mind focused. She kept looking over at Mike who was sitting in the kitchen working on his homework. With her books spread out across the dining room table in front of her, El tried to practice the math problems in her workbook but every few minutes, she was looking up at Mike to see what he was doing. He didn't look as upset as he had earlier that afternoon but he definitely wasn't happy.

Karen was in the kitchen making dinner and Dustin, Lucas, and Will would be coming over soon. Sighing, El turned in her chair, looking around the room. It seemed strange that just a few months ago, she hadn't been able to come up here freely because her presence had been a secret. Now, that almost seemed like a distant memory.

Mike eventually gave up on his homework and went into the living room to watch TV. Ted was working late at the office so Mike was able to commandeer the La-Z-Boy, at least until his dad got home later. Deciding she also deserved a break from her school work, El pushed herself away from the table and walked into the living room to join Mike.

She wasn't quite sure what to make of his behavior. He'd been distant and short with her ever since they'd gotten home and she wasn't used to it. She wasn't sure what it meant but it didn't feel good. Still, she felt bad for him since he'd gone through a lot today with Troy and wanted to be there for him.

The lights were off in the living room so the only illumination came from the TV and the lights in the dining room. El got comfortable on the couch and looked from the TV to Mike as he flipped through channel after channel, never settling on anything for more than a few

seconds. She couldn't keep up with any of the programs so she watched him instead, wondering what he was thinking.

Meanwhile, Mike was acutely aware of El's presence and for some reason, it was making him incredibly uncomfortable. He'd ditched the frozen peas over an hour ago but he knew his face still looked horrendous. Why was she still looking at him? She probably thought he was such a loser for letting Troy beat him up like this. The sympathetic look on her face made his stomach turn and he wished she'd stop watching him. Sure, it was cool that she could defend herself and anyone else against just about anyone or *anything*, but this felt different. Everything Troy had been saying for months swirled around in his head, reminding him that he was weak and El ultimately didn't need him. Why would she? She was a human weapon with the ability to do just about anything she wanted with her mind. She could embarrass bullies and take down inter-dimensional monsters. She was a complete bad-ass and he felt totally out of place around her now. He wanted to be able to defend himself or defend his friends when they were in trouble but when push came to shove, he'd gotten the crap beaten out of him and he never even got the chance to defend himself.

Why was she just *staring* at him? The TV was *right there* and she could be looking anywhere but at him. Her eyes on him made him feel self-conscious and his skin crawled with shame and discomfort.

"Could you *stop*?" He finally exclaimed in exasperation and El startled, her doe eyes widening. "Stop staring at me, okay? It's awkward and weird," He huffed, scowling at the TV before the words rolled out of his mouth faster than he could think about them. "Why did you have to go after Troy? I know that's what you did. Dustin told me they saw you throw him and James into a wall. He's just gonna keep doing the same crap. Maybe even *more* now. Do you *get* that?" She didn't say anything and he was losing steam. "You probably just made things worse,"

El looked down. She had only been trying to help, after all. She cared about Mike a lot - he was her favorite person. What else was she supposed to do if not protect him when someone wanted to hurt him? Still, he was obviously upset about it and she could feel hot tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. She quickly darted from the couch

and disappeared from the room.

As he watched her leave, Mike groaned with regret, resting his cheek against his fist as he continued to absent-mindedly flip through channels.

.....

The boys had stuck around for awhile after dinner to play D&D but it was obvious that Mike wasn't into it. There was an obvious tension between Mike and El that made Lucas, Dustin, and Will incredibly uncomfortable. They weren't sure what had happened exactly but El hadn't come downstairs with them, instead choosing to stay upstairs in the dining room with her workbooks. Despite having them laid out in front of her, it'd been obvious that she wasn't doing anything with them. Mike was also distant and unlike himself. His campaign, while well-thought out, lacked the same sense of drama and action that he normally brought to his narration. His mind was elsewhere and everyone could tell which made enjoying the game that much more difficult.

By the time Hopper came by to pick El up, she still hadn't come back downstairs. Lucas, Dustin, and Will went up to say good-bye but Mike stubbornly stayed in the basement.

"Seriously, dude?" Lucas asked, giving his friend the side-eye.

Mike didn't respond, instead making a vague facial expression and shrugging his shoulders.

Lucas rolled his eyes and the three boys went upstairs.

"We'll see you Sunday, right El?" Dustin said as he hugged the crestfallen young girl.

El shrugged, her gaze cast low.

"Hey, don't worry about Mike," Lucas said, putting a hand on El's shoulder. "He's just being a baby right now,"

"Angry," El's voice was almost a whimper.

"He's mad about what happened," Dustin explained. "Not you,"

"He'll get over it," Lucas reassured her.

"Yeah," Will agreed. "He just needs some time. He can get moody like that and after what Troy did, it makes sense,"

"Exactly," Dustin nodded, nudging the El playfully. "So we'll see you Sunday, *right?*" He grinned encouragingly and El offered a small half-smile.

"Sunday," She nodded and hugged them all before walking outside with Hopper.

Meanwhile, down in the basement, Mike was waging an internal battle with himself and his own stubbornness. He didn't want to be mad at El and honestly, he wasn't. He was just embarrassed and self-conscious more than anything. Any anger he had was directed at Troy for what he did and at himself for not being strong or tough enough to defend himself. He felt like a complete loser and hated the fact that El was seeing him like that. The logical thing to do seemed to be to avoid her while he was feeling this way but at the same time, part of him felt like he was making it worse. He wanted to say good-bye to her and he wished they'd been able to spend more time together today and have fun but his own stubbornness had gotten in the way of that.

"Dude," Lucas said in a scolding tone as the boys plodded back downstairs. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What are you talking about?" Mike retorted automatically, though he knew exactly what he meant.

"El's super upset," Dustin explained. "What did you say to her?"

"Nothing," Mike replied defensively.

"Bullshit," Lucas rolled his eyes.

"She looked like she'd been crying," Will informed him gently as he sat back down at the table and Mike felt a pang of guilt in his chest.

"Whatever lover's quarrel you two had, you need to figure your shit out," Lucas surmised, plopping back down into his seat.

"It wasn't a *lover's quarrel!*" Mike exclaimed, his cheeks pinkening.

Dustin shook his head. "You're so clueless, dude,"

Deadpanning, Mike looked at his curly-haired friend. "*What?*"

"You obviously love Eleven," Lucas answered for him bluntly.

"Shut up," Mike rolled his eyes dismissively, ignoring the strange bundle of nerves that seemed to be going wild in his stomach.

"I'm not kidding," Lucas said plainly. "Which is why I don't understand why you're being such a baby right now,"

"You don't understand!" Mike yelled, frustrated.

"You're right; I don't," Lucas waved his arms dramatically. "Because a month ago, you had us in the *Upside Down* looking for her and now you're acting weird and not even saying good-bye to her when she leaves,"

"That's pretty messed up," Dustin added.

"And making her cry," Lucas said.

"Since when do you care about El so much?" Mike retorted, his defenses still up but wavering.

"She saved our asses!" Lucas exclaimed. "Not once, not twice, but *three times*. Are you really asking that question?"

"And there was the whole jumping off the cliff thing," Dustin chimed in.

"*That*, too!" Lucas said. "Seriously, man, whatever's going on, you've gotta let it go. Be pissed at Troy, sure, but not El,"

Mike bit his bottom lip. He knew they were right, though he hated to admit it, *and* be confronted about it so directly. Still, he hated the

idea that he'd hurt El's feelings enough for her to cry. As ashamed as he felt about what happened today, he felt even worse knowing that he'd hurt her.

.

"I'm all out of love, what am I without you? I can't be too late to say that I was so wrong..."

23. Here Comes The Rain Again

[A/N: I didn't expect to write as much for this chapter as I did but here we are XD Thank you all so much for your sweet reviews. Also, sorry about any typos! I get a little excited to post sometimes and don't proofread before I put the chapters up lol I'll try and go through and fix anything that I missed.

I've got another mildly nerve-wracking week ahead of me at my internship so wish me luck! I'll try and get another chapter done by the end of the week :) Until then, enjoy!]

Chapter 23: Here Comes The Rain Again (by Eurythmics)

"I want to walk in the open wind, I want to talk like lovers do. I want to dive into your ocean. Is it raining with you?"

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The supercom sat on the coffee table in front of him, daring him to make the call. Mike's leg bounced with nervous tension as he stared at it, willing himself to build up the nerve to call El and apologize. She was at Hopper's for the weekend so he knew he'd be able to reach her on his own and without any assistance from her powers. The question now was how long he was going to stare at the device in front of him before he finally felt brave enough to contact her. All he could imagine was her crying because of him and that felt like a gut punch worse than anything Troy had delivered earlier that day.

Mike let out a breath, and some of his nervousness along with it, as he finally picked up the supercom, adjusting it to the right channel - not the same one he used with the guys otherwise he was asking for even more embarrassment. His leg was still shaking and his palms felt sweaty but at least she wouldn't be able to see him. That made it a little easier, though not by much.

"El?" He tentatively spoke into the device, clearing his throat. "Um, it's me, Mike. Are you there? Um... over,"

His heart was racing as he waited for her to respond, *if* she would

respond. He wasn't sure if she had her supercom nearby or more importantly, if she'd want to talk to him. He felt like a complete ass for talking to her and acting the way he did today. He'd been embarrassed over what happened and more self-conscious than he'd ever been around her but that was still no excuse and he hadn't realized how big of a mistake he'd made until his friends made it blatantly obvious.

After a couple minutes, she still hadn't responded so he tried again. "Hey El? Are you there? Over," He hoped he didn't sound as desperate as he felt. He just wanted to hear her voice, to know she was listening so he could make things right.

He was about to give up when his supercom crackled in his hand. "Here," Her voice was soft, a whisper. "Over,"

Mike couldn't help the beaming smile that spread across his face. "El!" He exclaimed excitedly, then immediately toned himself down. "Hey! Um... I was... I wanted to talk to you - about today,"

El didn't say anything so he continued. "Look, I'm really sorry. I was a total mouthbreather and you were just... I know you meant well. I was just embarrassed and didn't want you to think I was a total loser so um... I hope you, um... I hope we... uh..."

He couldn't see her but as he spoke, a hint of a smile tickled the corners of her lips and as he stumbled, looking for the right words, it only grew. "Mike," She finally interrupted his stammering and he stopped right away. "I understand," Her words were soft and even through the phone, he could hear the smile in her voice. "You're... my favorite," She added slowly, barely whispering, but Mike caught it and he was glad she couldn't see the blush that had spread like wildfire over his face, turning even his ears a little pink.

"Um, I'll make it up to you," He said quietly, still reeling from her comment. "Next time you come over, we can do whatever you want!" He fidgeted with a stray D&D character piece that was sitting on the table, his cheeks hurting from smiling.

"Okay," El agreed.

"Okay, great," Mike said cheerily, trailing off a bit as he floundered, searching for something else to say. Even though he couldn't find the words, he still felt happy and complete knowing she was there listening and didn't hate him for how he'd acted earlier that day. As they both sat in silence, unsure of what to say, their mutual smiles were more than enough indication that things were gonna be okay between them. Maybe more than okay.

.....

Karen had taken the Wheeler family to church again on Sunday so El hung out at Hopper's that morning with reluctant patience.

"Order up," He chimed pleasantly, despite the ever-present gruffness to his voice, as he spooned a pile of scrambled eggs onto the plate in front of El. She eyed it suspiciously. They weren't as fluffy as Becky and Karen made them and some of the pieces had white while others were yellow, however, they still tasted good so she ate them along with the sausage links he'd prepared beforehand.

"So what do you think?" He said, sitting down at the table. "Should we go over some of your schoolwork?"

El deadpanned. They'd spent the entire Saturday going through each of her subject workbooks with a fine-toothed comb. If it was possible for someone's brain to hurt, that's exactly what she was feeling.

"Yeah, okay," Hopper chuckled, standing up and walking over to the counter. "I guess you did enough yesterday," He eyed the dirty pans on the stove, contemplating cleaning them now but deciding against it. "You'll be in a real school before you know it, kid,"

At that, El smiled as she pushed bits of egg around on her plate. She wanted to be in a real school more than anything. Though with her current living situation, she wasn't sure if that would be with her friends in Clarksville or in Hawkins. Could she go to two schools at once?

"What's wrong with the eggs?" Hopper noticed her playing with the remaining eggs on her plate and she'd barely eaten half of her sausages.

El shook her head. "Good," She nodded, omitting the part where they seemed weird. "Not hungry,"

"*Not hungry?*" Hopper feigned shock, smirking. "You mean the bottomless pit is finally *full*?"

El shrugged, offering a half-smile.

"Alright, well go get yourself together," He said, taking her plate. "We're gonna head over to the Wheelers' in ten minutes,"

El jumped from her seat at the table and darted into the room Hopper had put together for her. It wasn't much and there was still a lot of junk in there but it was better than sleeping out on the couch. She had a futon and a small dresser, plus half a closet to hang her pretty dresses from Nancy. She may have been wary when this living arrangement began but as time passed, she was getting used to it. She liked Hopper even though he was still a bit intimidating at times and she was beginning to trust Becky more and more. She'd been nothing but nice to El, albeit a little overprotective sometimes, and even Terry was someone she wanted to know more. That strange encounter she'd had with her left her wanting to spend more time with this woman who was actually her mother. It seemed she was surrounded by people who cared about her, something she'd never experienced in the lab. Papa had said he cared but now, after everything she'd experienced since discovering Mike and his friends, she knew what caring about someone really looked like and that was not Papa.

.....

El and the boys arrived at Mike's house around the same time and as promised, Mike let El choose what they would do for the day.

"We told him to apologize, not to let her take over," Dustin mumbled sarcastically to Lucas as they stood outside in the crisp late January air, watching as Mike explained training wheels to El.

"So these go here," He said, attached the old training wheels to his bike as El watched with intrigue. "They help you keep your balance so you don't fall off," He explained, standing up and gently moving

the bike side to side to demonstrate. "They're supposed to help you get used to how it feels to balance so then eventually, you can do it on your own without them,"

"Yeah," Dustin commented with a smirk. "That means no using your powers to balance, El,"

El shot a mischievous grin back at him before smiling at Mike.

"Do you think you're ready?" Mike asked, even as El was climbing onto the bike. "I can help you, if you want," He said, afraid to let go of the handle-bars despite El's bold confidence. "We can start off really slow, just here in the driveway until you get the hang of it,"

Ignoring Mike's over-attentiveness, El placed her feet on the pedals, pushing them in circles just as Mike had explained. Within seconds, Mike lost his grip on the handlebars and watched as El pedalled down the driveway and into the street.

"Make sure you look before you go into the street!" Mike called out and Lucas and Dustin snickered.

"You sound like her mom," Lucas quipped.

"Shut up," Mike deadpanned, though he reeled his attentiveness back a notch, watching quietly as El rode in circles in the road. The look of sheer joy on her face made his chest swell and he couldn't help the broad smile that stretched across his lips.

"What else are we doing today?" Will asked as the four stood idly watching El.

"Whatever El wants to do, apparently," Lucas said sarcastically.

"We could go to the arcade later," Mike suggested, ignoring Lucas' comment. "Or jump back into the campaign,"

"Are you sure El wouldn't mind?" Dustin teased, batting his eyelashes at Mike.

"Seriously?" Mike glared, mildly annoyed.

Dustin laughed, "Relax, dude," He slapped Mike on the shoulder good-naturedly. "We're just kidding,"

"Yeah, this is cool," Lucas grinned as El made her way back to the driveway.

"Maybe she can get a bike of her own soon and ride along with us," Will said thoughtfully as El stopped in front of them.

"Hey El," Dustin said. "You think Hopper will let you out of school next Saturday for my party?"

"Party?" She asked, quirking her eyebrow.

"For his birthday," Will said. "It's on Wednesday but the party is Saturday,"

"Yeah, you know," Lucas added. "Food, fun, friends,"

"Friends?" El pondered over the word, then nodded. "Yes,"

"Awesome," Dustin grinned.

"Can I..." She said slowly, looking from Dustin to Mike and back again. "Bring new friends?"

"Oh um," Dustin paused. "Sure, I guess... what new friends?"

"She met some girls in Becky's neighborhood," Mike explained, recalling their last supercom conversation. "You think they'd be able to come down here, El?"

El shrugged and, moving on from the topic, she pointed to the bike on which she was seated. "No training wheels," She instructed, looking to Mike.

"What?" He blinked. "Are you sure? You *just* started riding..."

"Ready," She said proudly, puffing out her chest as she got off the bike.

"C'mon Mike," Lucas said. "If she can flip a van with her mind, I think

she can catch herself if she starts to fall,"

"Yeah," Dustin chimed in. "Let her try it,"

Mike sighed, reluctantly crouching down to remove the training wheels he'd just put on. "Alright, there," He said as the second wheel came off in his hand. "Just remember, you've gotta balance. Don't go too fast until you've got it,"

El looked at him and as he stood up, he realized they were incredibly close. He had to lean back a little bit to avoid bumping into her and the proximity sent an electric current through him.

"I can do it," She said definitively, her eyes almost hypnotizing him.

"O-Okay," He managed, stepping away from the bike and clearing his throat as his friends watched, grinning at their friend's sheepish behavior.

As El got herself situated on the bike once more, she could feel the decreased sense of balance as she moved to lift both feet off the ground. Her friends were watching her with apprehension as she wobbled, the bike moving down the driveway and back into the street. The feeling was unnerving and her breath seemed to catch in her chest such that she wasn't sure if she was thrilled or terrified. She wanted so desperately to be able to ride bikes with the boys so it couldn't hurt to use her powers a *little bit* to keep her balanced and make sure she didn't fall. It only took the slightest amount of energy to help her steady herself but that gave her more freedom than the training wheels. This way she could really feel the balancing act she was performing on the bike and she began to trust herself a little more the longer she went without falling. The cool winter air whipped against her face and she could feel it grazing over her short hair as she flew down the street, pedalling faster as her mind and body worked together to keep her balanced. She felt so free, like she could go anywhere and no one could stop her. She wouldn't know where to go but the potential was exhilarating.

A sudden pain in her lower abdomen distracted her from riding and she broke the mental hold she'd been maintaining on the bike. She'd never experienced anything quite like that so she wasn't sure what to

make of it. Before she could think much more, a sharper pain struck her and her brow furrowed as the sensation waxed and waned. With her concentration disrupted, she didn't realize she'd leaned a little too far to the side and the bike went down in the street.

"El!" Mike exclaimed, immediately running over to her as the other three boys followed.

"El, are you okay?" Dustin asked as she stiffly lifted herself up and moved into a sitting position.

"Hurts," She said, holding her stomach and leaning forward.

"Your stomach hurts?" Mike asked, confused. "Is that why you fell?"

"You've got a pretty nasty scrape on your knee," Lucas commented, gesturing to the tear in the knee of her pants.

"Do you wanna go inside?" Mike asked and El nodded, wincing. "Okay, help her up, you guys," He said, hoisting El up on one side as Lucas assisted on the other.

"Do you think you're gonna be sick?" Will asked as the boys helped her walk back to the house.

"Dude, don't give her any ideas!" Lucas exclaimed.

"Guys, shut up," Mike said, rolling his eyes as Dustin opened the door and they helped El into the basement. "Do you wanna sit down?" He asked in a gentler tone, gesturing to the couch but El shook her head, immediately breaking from their grasp and heading for the bathroom.

"She totally looks like she's gonna spew," Dustin commented as they watched the bathroom door almost close behind her, save for a few inches of space.

"This would be a great time for her to be okay with closing the door," Lucas winced, anticipating the sound of retching as the boys walked over to the couch, keeping the bathroom out of sight.

Inside the bathroom, El felt sick. Her head felt fuzzy and woozy and her lower abdomen was aching. She felt like she had to go to the

bathroom so she pulled her pants down and sat on the toilet. El immediately noticed a large, dark red stain in her new underwear and screamed. There was a lot of blood and when she peered into the toilet bowl, it seemed to still be coming out. A sharp pain wracked her lower belly and she groaned with discomfort, beads of sweat forming at her brow as tears filled her eyes. She had no idea what was happening but she felt like something was very, *very* wrong.

"El?" Mike gently tapped the door panel. He sounded worried. "Hey, are you okay? What's going on?"

"Nancy," El whimpered, staring at the stain as nausea pricked at her stomach and light-headedness made her vision blur. "Get Nancy!"

"What, why?" Mike blinked. "What's going on?"

"I'll go get Nancy," Will said, hurrying up the staircase.

"I'll come, too," Lucas followed closely behind.

"El, um," Mike hesitated. "Is there anything we can do? Or uh, bring you? What's wrong?"

El vigorously shook her head, tears sliding down her cheeks as she held her stomach. "No,"

Mike and Dustin exchanged a concerned look just as Nancy came down the steps with Lucas and Will on her tail.

"Where is she?" She asked and Mike and Dustin both pointed to the slightly ajar bathroom door.

"El?" Nancy knocked on the door frame. "It's Nancy. What's going on?" She could hear the girl's soft cries through the crack in the doorway. "I'm gonna come in, okay?"

"Okay," El's voice came out as a whisper, punctuated by soft sobs.

"Can I close the door, El?" Nancy asked gently. "The boys are right on the other side,"

El considered this for a moment and agreed with a slight nod of her

head. As Nancy closed the gap in the door frame, the boys watched in surprise from the other side.

"Okay," Nancy said, turning around and immediately having a strong feeling she knew what the problem was. "What's wrong?"

El looked up at her, her eyes glistening with tears and her face crumpling with fear and pain. "I'm... bleeding,"

"Oh El..." Nancy walked over to the sink and ran the hand towel under cool water. "I guess no one has talked to you about your period yet, have they?"

El looked up, her eyebrows knitting together in confusion as her head tilted back. Her eyes were a little glassy and her hairline was wet with sweat. "Period?"

"Every girl goes through this," Nancy explained, dabbing away the sweat on El's forehead with the towel. "It's completely normal, even if it is kind of scary when it happens. The first time I got mine, I was actually at school and it was super embarrassing,"

"First time?" El questioned in a small voice.

"Yeah," Nancy nodded. "It's gonna happen every month now for the rest of your life, unless you get preg -" She halted herself, scrunching her forehead as she reconsidered the topic she was heading into. "Um, actually let's have that conversation another day. Anyway, um, yes, this happens every month and I'll give you some stuff to help deal with it, okay?"

"It... hurts," El said, her voice almost breathless as another surge of pain wracked her abdomen.

"Yeah, I know," Nancy nodded sympathetically. "Those are cramps. They'll come, too but there's medicine you can take so they don't hurt as much. Some months are worse than others," She moved to the door. "I'm gonna go grab a few things and I'll be right back, okay?"

El nodded, feeling a bit calmer than she did before, though she was still very uncomfortable.

"Guys," Nancy scolded as she opened the door to find all four boys crowded around it so she couldn't take a step without stepping on one of them. "A little space, please?"

"Is she okay?"

"Is she sick?"

"Why did she scream?"

Nancy smirked. "She's fine. She's just um..." She paused, thinking of how to best say this without being too blunt. "She's not sick. She's just... her... *Aunt Flo* finally came to town..."

Mike's face contorted in confusion. "What?"

"Isn't Flo that lady at the police station?" Lucas asked.

"She has another aunt?" Will looked around at everyone else for an explanation as Dustin slapped his face, slowly dragging it down as he looked at them in disbelief.

"You guys are seriously dense, you know that?" He looked at each of the other boys expectantly but their dumbfounded expressions only made him shake his head. "Okay," He sighed. "Mike, I don't know how to tell you this but your girlfriend's a woman now,"

Mike's face blanched and he blinked in surprise before adamantly retorting, "She's not my girlfriend!"

"Missing the point, dude!" Dustin fired back, then groaned. "She got her period! God, am I the *only one* who paid attention in Health?"

"Probably," Lucas quipped under his breath.

"So wait," Mike shook his head. "She's..."

Nancy nodded. "I'm gonna go get her some stuff to help her feel better. In the meantime, stop crowding the door guys... give her some space,"

Still reeling, the boys moved away from the bathroom and

congregated on the couch, trying to process this information and feeling really awkward about it at the same time.

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After getting herself cleaned up, El spent the next hour or so in Nancy's room, learning everything she could imagine about periods. Nancy had given her some Midol that seemed to be taking the edge off of her pain and discomfort, though the pad she wore felt very strange. Nancy explained that while this would happen every month, she would get used to it, and she just had to make sure she was prepared when it came.

By the time she came back downstairs, the boys were wrapping up their current D&D campaign for the night so that the boys could go home for dinner. As the boys and El made their way upstairs, a knock at the door echoed through the foyer.

"I'll get it!" Nancy called out, trotting down the stairs. She was expecting Steve to come pick her up for a dinner date. He'd called earlier that afternoon, apologizing over and over for Friday and his delayed response to Dave and Lauren's callousness. After a lot of gentle, though persistent, persuasion, he'd convinced her to let him take her out for burgers.

To Nancy's surprise, Jonathan stood at the doorstep, his hands tucked deep into his pockets. He hadn't been expecting to see her either and he couldn't help but notice how cute she looked in her pink sweater and jeans, her wavy hair tied up in a ponytail. Little tendrils of hair curled around the sides of her face, drawing attention to the sparkling earrings she wore.

"Uh..." Jonathan stammered, for a moment forgetting why he was there. "I um, I'm here to pick up Will,"

Nancy, who'd also been caught off-guard and staring, shook her head clear of its fog. "Oh, right, yeah,"

"I'm coming!" Will said as he and the other kids rounded the corner from the kitchen to the foyer.

"You um..." Jonathan had a hard time keeping his eyes off of Nancy and before he could stop himself, he was talking. "You look really nice,"

The boys exchanged amused looks but El didn't understand what was going on.

"Um, thanks..." Nancy forced her blush away, then quickly added, "I'm just waiting for Steve..."

Jonathan blinked, snapping out of whatever daze he'd fallen into. "Right," His brow furrowed. "Have fun, I guess?" He said, mentally chastising himself for acting like an idiot. "Um, Will, are you ready?"

"Yeah, I'm ready," Will said, unable to contain his grin as he looked back at his friends then followed his brother out to the car.

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El still had a couple hours after dinner until Hopper was supposed to pick her up. Nancy was still out with Steve and Karen was in the kitchen with Holly cleaning. Ted had gone upstairs to his office to do some work and Mike and El were in the living room. Mike had originally wanted to hang out in the basement but Karen had quickly shut that down.

"What's the big deal?" He'd whined, rolling his eyes. "She's down there with us all the time anyway,"

"When she's here with your other friends, that's fine," Karen explained, elbows deep in a sink full of dirty dishes. "But not when it's just the two of you,"

"Are you serious right now?" He gave her an incredulous look.

"Yes, I'm serious," She shot the same look back at him. "I don't feel comfortable with the two of you alone downstairs considering you have feelings for her," She gave him a pointed look and Mike fought against the blush creeping across his cheeks.

"Oh come *on*!" He groaned, pretending to be more irritated than embarrassed. "I do not!"

"Nancy said -"

"Screw Nancy!" Mike fired back, now actually irritated that his sister was going around saying things like that. Regardless of whether it was true or not.

"Just take the living room," Karen continued, unfazed. "You can watch whatever it is you wanna watch in there,"

"But the movies are downstairs," Mike offered up a feeble excuse.

"Do you have legs?" Karen retorted in only the way a mom can. "I think you can bring whatever movie you want up here,"

Mike finally gave up the argument and he and Eleven went downstairs to pick a movie from the shelf in the basement.

"Let me know if you wanna know what any of them are about," Mike said as he stood behind her. El was crouched down in front of the shelf, scanning the rows of VHS tapes and pondering their covers thoughtfully.

"Those are all Disney movies," He commented on the ones she'd pulled out to examine further. "This one is Cinderella," He pointed to the one in her right hand. "It's about this girl who lives with her stepfamily and they treat her like crap but then she meets a prince and they get married. It's really cheesy..." He grimaced, hoping she wouldn't pick something so girly. "But Holly likes it and Nancy used to watch it a lot, too. The other one is a fox and a hound dog that become friends and they kind of grow up together but it's really sad," El considered this information and Mike noted the way she pursed her lips and furrowed her brow when she was thinking hard about something. It was kind of cute.

Realizing his train of thought, he immediately redirected himself, talking a little faster than necessary. "So what are you thinking you wanna watch?" He asked, tapping his hand against his leg with forced patience and nervous energy.

"This one?" El held up a case with a picture of a deer on it. She remembered seeing those animals in the woods after she'd escaped.

"That's Bambi," Mike said. "It's pretty good, I guess. There's still some sad parts but you can't really get away from that with a Disney movie,"

Seemingly satisfied with her choice, El stood up, clutching the VHS to her chest as she led the way back upstairs.

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Throughout the movie, El was completely transfixed, only breaking her focus to ask questions about certain parts. Even when Mike got up to make a bowl of popcorn at one point, she didn't move a muscle. He'd come back to find her in the same position she'd been in before: Legs curled up under her with a blanket covering her and a heating pad pressed to her stomach, her eyes wide with fascination as the images on the TV danced across her pupils.

"Want some?" Mike offered the bowl to her when he plopped down next to her and she absent-mindedly reached for it without looking away from the screen.

They'd just gotten past the scene in which the other animals stopped when the elder deer entered the meadow. Before that, El had been on the edge of her seat with suspenseful tension as Bambi's mom went out into the meadow to make sure it was "safe". Now, as the animals rushed away from the meadow and dramatic orchestral music filled the living room, El was just as nervous as she'd been at the beginning of the scene.

Meanwhile, Mike couldn't help himself from watching her reaction. He'd seen this movie at least a dozen times before but watching her see it for the first time was special. Her emotional responses were raw and he enjoyed the movie more knowing how captivated she was by it.

As Bambi, his mother, and the elder deer darted across the meadow, a gunshot rang out and El jumped, her eyes widening.

"It's okay, El," Mike said gently. "Just keep watching,"

El gave him an uncertain look before turning back to the screen to

see Bambi's mom explain that "Man" was in the forest.

"Bad men?" El asked quietly.

Mike nodded, "Sort of," He shrugged. "Hunters,"

He'd been expecting more questions from her but El returned to her near-hypnotized state as she watched the movie progress. She'd been all but completely still, periodically reaching for the popcorn bowl and not noticing the way Mike blushed when their hands accidentally touched. As Bambi and his mother ate from a patch of new spring grass, the suspenseful music started up again and El felt her chest sink with worry.

Faster Bambi! His mother cried as they raced across the snowy landscape. *Keep running!*

El looked to Mike who didn't know what to say, before quickly turning back to the TV, squirming with apprehension. Finally, another gunshot rang out and El jumped at the sound just as she had before, almost knocking the popcorn bowl this time.

As Bambi realized his mother was no longer behind him and went out into the woods, calling her name, El's face began to crumple with realization. Mike looked at her and noticed the tears brimming in her eyes and the few that had already escaped down her cheek.

He thought about saying something but wasn't sure what. He wasn't sure what to do and he felt completely awkward but he followed his instincts and grabbed her hand, scooting closer to her on the couch. El noticed and moved in as well, shedding tears freely as Bambi cried out for his mother and the elder deer led him away. Mike did his best to ignore the way his heart flipped when El rested her head against his shoulder.

El quickly cheered up as the movie progressed, even questioning the meaning of the word "twitterpated", despite Friend Owl's explanation. The way the owl had described it made it sound terrifying but Mike had laughed nervously at her question.

"It's um... it's like when you like someone..." He said, trailing off but

her intent expression meant she was waiting to hear more. "Uh... a lot. Like he said, you um, sometimes you can feel weak in your knees or like, I don't know... um... it's this feeling like..."

El watched as he squirmed, wondering why this was such a difficult thing to explain. "Happy?" She tried to guess and he shrugged.

"Uhh... sort of... but it's different," Mike said, avoiding eye contact at all costs. "It's this weird like, um... excited feeling but it's also kind of scary a-and weird..." He finally gave up, feeling completely uncomfortable and thankful that the lights were dimmed because he was certain his face had turned a deep shade of crimson by this point. How was he supposed to explain this feeling when to be honest, he was kind of feeling it himself? Trying to define it for her only made it worse. El seemed to be satisfied with his explanation, however, and they sat quietly through the rest of the movie until Hopper came to pick her up.

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Hopper and El stopped back at his trailer to pick up El's things before heading home. As they made their way to the door, a backpack on El's back and a small duffel bag over Hopper's shoulder, El paused to look at the hand-drawn picture by the door. She'd been wondering about it since she'd first come home with Hopper but had never asked.

"What's this?" She pointed to the picture as Hopper stood behind her, waiting to exit.

He frowned. "It's a picture. C'mon, let's go,"

El didn't move though, instead studying the image. There was a big house and an even bigger sun shining in the sky. A man and a woman stood with a little girl next to them. El pointed to the girl and looked up at Hopper with a questioning look.

Hopper narrowly avoided the subject, opening the door and ushering El outside. "C'mon, your aunt is expecting us," He said, giving her little opportunity to object. "Let's go,"

"I forgot to tell you yesterday," Hopper said, as if the incident with the picture had never happened. "These came yesterday," He reached into the center console and pulled out a few opened envelopes. "They're your papers. You're official, El," He said, shooting her a grin as she buckled herself into her seat and they pulled away from the trailer.

"Birth certificate, social security card..." He trailed off. "Everything you need,"

El opened one of the envelopes and pulled out a fancy-looking piece of paper. Hopper glanced over.

"That's the birth certificate," He explained. "Proves you're a U.S. citizen, *that you exist*, all that fun stuff..." El did her best to read the words on the paper as he spoke. "I talked to your aunt and even got your real birthdate on there... at least, we're pretty sure that's what it is,"

El scanned the paper, finding the box that said "Birthdate" and next to it, "November 3, 1971".

"Hope you're okay with the name," Hopper said as he turned onto the highway and El found the spot on the certificate that read: *Eleanor Jane Ives*. "We couldn't put 'Eleven' as an official name for you on there so I just picked something that fit,"

"El-ah-nor Jay-ne I-ves," El sounded it out slowly, smiling at the sound of it. "I like it," She smiled up at him.

"Well, good," Hopper grinned. "'Cause it would be a pain in the ass to have to go back and change it," He chuckled and El stared at the paper in her hands, an indescribable feeling of belonging washing over her unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

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"Fascinating," Brenner breathed as he stared into a large glass tank filled with water. A small creature, roughly six inches long, with sharp teeth and no eyes was swimming around inside. Resembling a tadpole, it darted around the tank, frequently bumping into the sides

of the glass. "And you said there are others?" He stood up straight, addressing the scientist beside him.

"Yes," He replied, adjusting his glasses. "Our research has indicated that once reaching the second stage of maturation, the larvae are able to fight for resources until the strongest survives. They appear to be relatively dormant at this stage, taking the time to grow and develop,"

"And then what?" Brenner asked, narrowing his eyes as the amphibious creature hovered next to him on the other side of the glass.

"We're not sure," The scientist admitted. "This is our oldest specimen so we're monitoring his progress closely. The others are in earlier stages of development,"

"The police chief," Brenner said coldly. "Has he found anything?"

The scientist shook his head. "He has assisted in collecting samples but to my knowledge, he hasn't been briefed on our findings,"

Brenner nodded thoughtfully. "And the girl? Have we found any trace of her?"

"Again, to my knowledge, no," The scientist shifted in place. "Though some of the other researchers have noticed a slight change in his demeanor on the field investigations,"

"What do you mean?" Brenner eyed the balding man closely.

"He appears to be less engaged, sir," He replied. "I could call Linda in to provide more information, if you like?"

"That won't be necessary," Brenner waved dismissively. "We just might have to employ more rigorous search techniques,"

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"Here comes the rain again, raining in my head like a tragedy, tearing me apart like a new emotion..."

24. Take My Breath Away

[A/N: So I told myself I wasn't gonna post this until I got a few more scenes in but 1)I like this stopping point and 2)I'm sick and therefore I do what I want.

Blah lol. For those of you digging the Jancy vibes, you'll probably enjoy this. Let me know what you think!]

Chapter 24: Take My Breath Away (by Berlin)

"Watching every motion in my foolish lover's game. On this endless ocean, finally lovers know no shame..."

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Flashback

"All of these are out of state, Jim," Diane said dolefully as she peered over her husband's shoulder to review the list of treatment facilities the nurse had brought in.

"So we'll go out of state," Hopper replied as if it was nothing. At this point, she couldn't argue. He'd become so stubborn. She knew he was in pain but so was she. She desperately wanted to hold onto that same hope that he carried but every direction they turned seemed to take them down the same road and she wasn't sure if he was blind to it or actively choosing to ignore their daughter's prognosis.

Hopper wanted to be strong. He needed to be, for his daughter, for his wife... Even as their options dwindled, he felt like he was grasping at straws but he couldn't live with himself if he didn't try to grasp at something. What kind of man - what kind of father - gives up on his little girl without a fight?

"Do we know if they take insurance?" Diane looked up at the nurse, Jodie, who'd stuck around, a sympathetic expression on her long, pale face. Her mousey brown hair was pulled up into a thin ponytail and she looked much younger than she probably was.

"I'm not sure," Jodie replied. "I think we might have a brochure at the

nurses' station for one or two of them. That might have information for payment options,"

Diane stole a glance at their sleeping daughter, resting peacefully with her head turned to the side against her pillow. "What if it doesn't work?" Diane questioned and Hopper cringed at the way her defeatist attitude chipped away at the remaining shred of hope he harbored. "What if we drag her out to one of these places -" She looked over the list again. "- in New York or Florida or Maryland and nothing changes? What if she can't make the trip? You heard the doctor - her cancer is aggressive and it's spreading!" Tears brimmed in her eyes as she added softly, "She's dying, Jim,"

Hopper looked at her, his eyes flashing despite the mournful look on her face. Exhaling sharply through his nose, he couldn't even formulate the words to respond to her. The comment was jarring and not something he wanted to hear, or accept.

"Um..." Jodie interjected with slight trepidation. "If I may... I had an internship when I was in college at a facility that may be able to help, and it's in the area,"

Shaking her head with dismayed resignation, Diane turned to the nurse as Hopper asked, "What facility?"

"Well, it's still a bit of a drive," The nurse admitted. "But it's in state. It's the Hawkins National Laboratory,"

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Benny's Burgers wasn't the same after Benny died and his brother took over but they still had the best fried food in the area and Nancy had insisted they go somewhere other than the mall. The last thing she wanted this weekend was to run into more of Steve's tactless and rude friends.

As they settled into a booth and waited on their orders, Nancy found herself zoning in and out of the story Steve was telling about Jennifer Hensley's party the weekend before.

"We told him, 'Dude, if you eat those, you're gonna regret it,' but he

ate the rest of the box!" Steve recalled, laughing. "Five minutes later, he's on the deck puking red and blue like it's the Fourth of fucking July and he just looks at us and goes, "That tasted like fruit roll-ups!"

"That's disgusting..." Nancy muttered, thankful that their food hadn't come out yet.

"I know, I know," Steve shook his head, wiping his eye after laughing particularly hard. "I'm sorry; It was just a hilarious party, Nance. I wish you'd come,"

"Yeah," She said, staring down at the table and pursing her lips as an awkward silence fell over them.

"But hey, I mean," He said, obviously uncomfortable with the break in conversation. "I get it. I know it hasn't been easy for you since Barb left town," He tried to make eye contact, sympathizing, but she wouldn't lift her gaze. "I mean, hell, I thought I had it bad at home but I never thought about running away,"

Nancy's sigh told him that this wasn't helping.

"Anyway, um," He fiddled with a packet of sugar he'd plucked from the ceramic container at the edge of their table. "I get it, it sucks. And especially after everything that happened with that..." He looked around, hushing his voice. "That *thing* at the Byers' house..."

"Can we..." Nancy contorted her face with discomfort. "Um, can we... not talk about this?" She finally made eye contact but it wasn't in the way he'd hoped. "Please?"

"Um, yeah," He blinked, sitting back and dropping the sugar packet. "Yeah, sure," He nodded, lowering his gaze to the table. "Whatever you want,"

The rest of their conversation kept to superficial topics about things that didn't matter with the same air of forced awkwardness until he dropped her off back at home. A light snow had begun to fall and some patches of grass by the trees were dusted with flakes.

"I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" Steve said, leaning against the steering wheel to see her through the open passenger window.

"Yeah," Nancy nodded, her arms wrapped around herself. "See you tomorrow,"

As she watched him pull away, tail lights fading into the distance, Nancy couldn't help but think about how disconnected their interactions had become. When had she drifted away? Was it because she was depressed about Barb? She couldn't deny the impact that loss had had on her and there were only a scattered few who actually understood the pain she was dealing with. She and Mike had been able to relate a little bit after El disappeared but he'd never given up hope that she was out there *somewhere*. Then lo and behold, she was and they were able to pick up where they left off. And she was happy about that - happy for her brother and happy that El was safe. But there wasn't going to be a happy ending with Barb. And what was worse, there wasn't even going to be a proper ending. No funeral or memorial service. Constantly fielding questions and comments about how Barb ran off to the city or took a bus to D.C. or whatever the latest rumor going around school happened to be.

Before she realized it, Nancy was walking. The thin layer of snow accumulating on the ground crunched beneath her boots as she made her way down Maple on an otherwise quiet night.

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There was a liquor store near Hopper's trailer. He liked it because it stood by itself; there weren't many other businesses or buildings around it so he was usually less likely to run into a lot of the people in Hawkins. Living on the outskirts of a small town, it was the best he could ask for in terms of anonymity. This one was coupled with a small neighborhood bar that typically didn't see patrons outside of old WWII and Vietnam vets drinking away the memories of war from open til close.

He'd just gotten back into town after dropping El off in Clarksville. His latest interaction with Becky had been awkward to say the least but on the bright side, they were no longer talking about what happened between them. After his misstep a few weeks ago, it was easier to keep things civil at this point. The fact that they were essentially co-parenting this telekinetic girl was an awkward detail he liked to conveniently ignore.

He'd spent the day trekking through the bleak and barren landscape of the Upside Down, looking for a girl that he was picking up from a cozy suburban house in a few hours. Scientists had swarmed around him, collecting samples and talking in hushed voices about something in the works but he hadn't heard too much. Their behavior had become a bit more excited, a bit more frantic, as time had passed and he wondered exactly what was going on with these samples they'd been collecting. Every time they encountered one of those yellow pods, he'd never been able to get a close look at what they were doing. It wasn't just him, Kevin, and Linda out there anymore - each expedition involved at least a dozen scientists and that only probed his curiosity more. What was the big deal that the lab had decided to up the ante?

Before and after his lab in the lab, he'd spent the day chasing teenagers who thought vandalism was an appropriate extra-curricular activity and filing paperwork after a few busted tail light warnings. For what it was worth, Hawkins' need for police assistance had declined dramatically since they found Will Byers. Still, that didn't stop Hopper from being exhausted after going through the day living this double life.

As he walked into the liquor store side of the establishment, he scanned the refrigerator for a case of Budweiser. The liquor store was sectioned off from the bar side by a four foot wooden divider that left Hopper enough room to get what he needed, stand in line, and excuse himself past any customers in line behind him, should they come in. He was surprised enough to see someone up at the register, given how quiet this place normally was. Out on the bar side, he saw several of the regulars nursing beer from glasses as they watched the latest play-off game up on the TVs. He'd actually forgotten the Superbowl was coming up soon. There was a shuffleboard table off to the side collecting dust and an older man with a handlebar mustache was playing darts alone in the corner.

"Hey Hop," Hopper was startled out of his exhausted mind-wandering by a familiar voice.

"Joyce," He blinked, recognizing her and fighting back a yawn. "What are you doin' here?"

She shrugged, gesturing with the six pack of Michelob's in her hand. "It's been a rough week,"

"You're tellin' me," Hopper replied gruffly. "Gimme a sec to pay for this and I'll catch up with you outside," He said, stepping up to the cashier so he could ring up his purchase as Joyce walked out of the building.

"So how's everything going?" She asked as soon as he was outside, her six pack sitting in wait atop the roof of her car.

"It's going," Hopper replied brusquely, setting his case of beer in the backseat of his SUV before leaning against the side and pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

"I mean, how's El? In her new home?" Joyce elaborated, though Hopper had gotten it the first time.

"She seems fine," Hopper nodded thoughtfully before lighting up and taking a drag. "I mean, you know she doesn't talk much but from what I can tell and what Becky's been sayin', she seems alright up there," He said, exhaling and blowing a cloud of smoke into the air, watching as it wafted across the tiny parking lot. "Apparently she's even got some friends," He added, his words heavy as though there was more to the story but he paused, lifting his cigarette to his lips.

"Well, that's a good thing," Joyce said, retrieving a cigarette from her purse and lighting up as well. "I know we were all worried about her being separated from the boys,"

"Yeah," Hopper admitted. "Except she suckered me into letting these new *friends* come down here next weekend so they can all go to that Henderson kid's birthday party,"

Joyce's eyebrows furrowed with thought as she eyed him and a smirk appeared on her lips. "Her first sleepover?"

Hopper rolled his eyes. "I don't know how the hell I'm gonna manage four girls in that trailer, even if they only come for one night,"

"Oh, Hop," Joyce crossed her arms to block out the cold, unable to stop smiling. "That's gonna be so *good* for her,"

"It better be 'cause it's gonna be a pain in the ass for me," Hopper retorted. "She asked me about it on the way back to Clarksville earlier and -"

"You couldn't say no," Joyce said knowingly. "Typical Hopper,"

He furrowed his brow suspiciously at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Joyce chuckled, "You're still the same Jim Hopper from high school," She replied. "Rough around the edges but a big softie deep down,"

He deadpanned, giving a look to indicate he was clearly not amused but it didn't shake her. Instead, she laughed, taking a final drag on her cigarette before dropping it to the ground and stomping it out with her boot.

"Let me know if you need any help," She said pleasantly, grabbing her six-pack from the roof of the car and opening the driver's side door. "When you're raising two boys, a girls' sleepover actually sounds like a nice change of pace,"

"I'll keep that in mind," He lifted his chin, grinning before tossing his cigarette butt into the parking lot. "Have a good night, Joyce,"

.....

Jonathan couldn't ignore the opportunity for some winter landscape photos as the snow drifted down gracefully over Hawkins. As soon as Joyce had gotten back from the liquor store, he'd gone out to try and capture as many images as he could while it was still fresh and unblemished by footprints, salt, or car exhaust. Ever since November, they didn't leave Will home alone if there was any way to avoid it so as soon as Joyce had pulled into the driveway, Jonathan's camera was around his neck and he was out the door.

He'd gotten a few good shots so far, mostly trees with mini snow mounds forming on delicately thin branches. There was a creek farther out that had frozen and the light from a distant streetlight was reflecting against the ice and the rocks beautifully.

Rustling from up near the road caught his attention and he stood up,

looking around for the source of the sound before he saw a petite young woman passing by several yards away.

"Nancy!" He called out as he headed over to her, unsure of how she could have such a magnetic pull on him that he hadn't thought twice about pursuing her. "Hey Nancy!" He called again as he got closer and she turned around.

She was in the same outfit he'd seen before but a brown suede coat with faux fur lining and a white knitted cap were protecting her from the elements.

"What are you doing out here?" He asked once he'd caught up to where she now stood standing in the road.

"I um," She said, looking around as though she were lost. "I was just taking a walk. I didn't realize how far I'd gone, though,"

"A walk?" Jonathan asked, quirking his head.

"Yeah," Nancy nodded and he could tell there was a lot on her mind by her expression. "Um, just thinking, I guess,"

"Is everything okay?" He asked tentatively, still eyeing her and trying to assess what was going on.

"Yeah, it's fine," She shook her head dismissively. "I'm fine. I just... " She sighed. "I don't know what I'm doing,"

Jonathan chortled. "I don't think most people do,"

"I guess," Nancy breathed, looking out into the woods as snowflakes landed on the shoulders and hood of her coat. "Um, what about you? Why are you out here?"

Jonathan held up his camera in response and Nancy nodded. "Oh, right,"

Without a word, they both began to walk down the road, falling into step in a comfortable silence as the street became progressively more slippery.

"Do you ever, like," Nancy started, breaking the silence quite suddenly. "Do you ever think about whether you're doing the right thing or if you're just, stuck?"

Jonathan shrugged, stuffing his hands into his pockets and regretting forgetting his gloves. "What do you mean?"

Nancy sighed, "I dunno," She said, defeated. "Nevermi -" Her words were cut short when her boot lost traction in the snow, her arms flailing as she lost her balance. Jonathan quickly reached out and grabbed her in an attempt to steady her but the sudden movement caused him to lose his own footing and the two of them went down in the snow-laden street with Jonathan breaking her fall.

"Ahh..." He groaned softly as he lay on his back, his coat having absorbed most of the impact but still knowing he was going to be sore later. "Are you okay?"

Nancy was still splayed over him, chest to chest and her face inches from his as she regained her bearings. "Um, yeah, I'm fine,"

Despite the cold, an unmistakable heat filled the air around them as their eyes locked on one another, their breath coming out in white puffs that merged as one between them. Neither moved for a moment, muscles tense for some uncertain reason as some sort of invisible magnetic pull tugged at them, urging them to move closer.

A loud scraping sound jarred them from the moment and they looked up to see a snowplow heading down the street.

"Here, c'mon," Jonathan said, grabbing her hand and helping her up. And even as he led her out of the street, Nancy didn't mind that he had yet to let go.

.....

"Turning and returning to some secret place inside. Watching in slow motion as you turn around and say... Take my breath away..."

25. Total Eclipse Of The Heart

[A/N: Bahhhh, I'm still sick :(Thanks for the reviews, guys!]

Chapter 25: Total Eclipse of the Heart (by Bonnie Tyler)

"Your love is like a shadow on me all of the time. I don't know what to do and I'm always in the dark, we're living in a powder keg and giving off sparks..."

.....

They scrambled clumsily away from the street, slipping in the fresh snow as Jonathan tugged at Nancy's hand, keeping her from falling again. The ground dipped and they looked up at the road above them as the snowplow passed, barely moving the inch that had fallen so far.

Nancy found herself mildly disappointed when Jonathan finally let go.

"Are you alright?" He asked as he stretched backwards, wincing at the bruise that was surely forming.

A cheeky grin formed on her face as she nodded then erupted into giggles. "Yeah, I'm fine," She managed as he watched in amused puzzlement.

"What's so funny?" He asked, raising an eyebrow as her fit of laughter continued. Tears were in her eyes and she leaned back against a tree trunk, using it to brace her as she tilted her head to the sky.

"I don't know," Her voice was high and she was smiling and even if he had no idea what was going on, it was a sight he was pleased to behold.

Thinking quickly, he lifted his camera and snapped a photo. The sound pulled Nancy from her laughing fit and she wiped away a tear. "Hey!"

"What?" He grinned innocently.

"I didn't say you could take a picture," She feigned offense, the lingering smile on her face betraying her.

He shrugged, letting his camera hang. "You got me,"

Nancy smirked at him, then looked down, feeling shy all of a sudden.

"It was a good shot, though" Jonathan said, his lips curved in a half-smile. "I think you'll like it,"

"It better be," She retorted with a laugh. "God, I probably look like an idiot,"

Jonathan shook his head and the small smile on his face made something flutter in Nancy's chest. "Not possible,"

There it was again - the heaviness in the air. Nancy looked down at the sparsely snow-laden ground around them in the hope that avoiding eye contact would make the butterflies in her stomach calm down. She wasn't sure if he was looking at her or not but she also didn't want to risk meeting his gaze.

"Did you um, wanna keep walking?" Jonathan asked after a moment and she could sense the hope in his voice.

"Actually..." She hesitated. Truthfully, she did. As weird and uncomfortable as she felt inside, it was a *good* feeling... but at the same time, she felt torn. As torn as she'd been feeling ever since she and Jonathan teamed up to kill the Demogorgon together. That week had changed the way she viewed him. Their little brothers had been friends for years so she'd always regarded Jonathan as a passing acquaintance but they'd never spent that much time getting to know one another.

What about Steve? She reminded herself and the thought was sobering. She needed to figure this out and the way she was feeling right now was dangerous.

"I um... I should actually be getting home," She said apologetically. "It's probably getting kinda late,"

"Oh," Jonathan said and Nancy winced at the disappointment in his

voice. "Yeah, that's cool. Do you need a ride? We're not far from my house,"

Nancy hesitated, weighing the pros and cons of riding home in Jonathan's car when she was feeling this way but ultimately deciding that walking all the way back home in the snow didn't seem like a good idea.

As he drove carefully through the snowy neighborhood, Jonathan couldn't help but steal glances at Nancy. She seemed to be leaning as far away from him as possible, her arm propped up on the door as she stared out the window. He knew he was being an idiot. She was dating Steve and there was no way she would look at him in *that* way. He'd gotten his hopes up once before, coming close to thinking she might actually see him as more than the brother of her kid brother's best friend. But after the monster was gone and Will came back, everything went back to normal and she went back to Steve. He didn't blame her as much as he chastised himself for expecting something more. And even now, he willed himself to stop pretending.

"Here we are," He said lamely, putting the car into park in her driveway.

"Yup," Nancy nodded, staring down at her lap, then looking up at her house. "Thanks for the ride," She finally looked at him. The first eye contact they'd had since the woods.

"No problem," He replied, pursing his lips and nodding.

"Okay, well," She was hesitating, but for what? "Um, goodnight,"

Jonathan blinked. "Goodnight," He managed, watching as she trudged through the snow on her lawn and disappeared into the house.

.....

The house was quiet when El left her room to go to the bathroom. She crept quietly over the wooden landings, trying to best to minimize the creaks and groans of the wood. The lights in the hall were off but a small plug-in night light plugged into the wall illuminated her path enough to avoid running into anything. As she'd

come out of the bathroom, she noticed the familiar bluish light coming from under Terry's door and the door that was not quite closed. Curious, she gently pushed it open.

She hadn't had the opportunity to "speak" with her mother since their last encounter in the darkness. El tried to keep her powers under wraps around Becky and Rose. She knew Hopper had mentioned it to Becky at least but it was still something she felt more comfortable concealing.

My baby... Terry's voice in her head was like a distant echo as the dissociated woman stared fixed at the TV. Her flat affect was disconcerting but El was slowly growing used to it, especially knowing what she knew now.

Still a little unsure of herself, El climbed up onto the end of Terry's bed, tucking her legs under her as she closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. As she allowed herself to focus, to find the darkness, she found it didn't take much effort on her part to get there.

There is so much we missed. El could see Terry, her nightgown reaching the edges of her ankles, her feet wet in the strange environment.

"I... don't understand," El admitted, staring up at the woman in perplexed fascination.

You're here because you want to understand. Terry explained. *You're a very special girl, El.*

"I have..." El paused, mulling over her words. "Never done this. Do you...?"

Terry smiled at her, reaching out and cupping El's cheek in a gentle embrace that immediately set El at ease. *You found me because you wanted to find me. I'm not doing any of this.* She rubbed a thumb softly over El's cheek. *I don't know the extent of your abilities but I know you're capable of more than you know.* She smiled softly at her daughter. *Sometimes we don't know our own strength until we find something worth being strong for.*

El looked down, soaking that statement in as a barrage of memories suddenly assaulted her mind - the school, the Demogorgon, the horrible screeching sounds it was making as her friends desperately yelled over each other. She remembered the feeling of hot, salty tears making her cheeks burn and the overwhelming exhaustion that felt like she was carrying weights in her pockets. She remembered the jarring visual memories of Dustin carrying her into the classroom, the way Mike's hands felt as he held hers and the tears that flooded his eyes as he told her about Eggos and Snowballs and promises. She knew what she had to do in that moment, though it was in no way easy. She remembered the way her body fought against her as she rolled off of the table, her head screaming at her in pain and resistance as she kept the monster pinned to the chalkboard. Lifting her arm to keep Mike back, to *protect* him, felt like an invisible force was trying to push that arm back down. Her other arm trembled as she held the monster still, her fear being swallowed up by the loyalty she felt to those boys. Her friends. She'd brought this monster here. It wanted her. She needed to be the one to make it go away. It was the only way this terror would end.

Terry wiped away a tear El hadn't realized had slipped out and she looked up at this woman and her ethereal smile.

Trust yourself and don't be afraid. Terry said and El furrowed her brow, trying to be as brave as her mother seemed to think she was.

I want to show you something. Terry said in a different, more solemn tone as the darkness faded away and El found herself back in the lab. For a moment, her stomach dropped with fear before she realized this was a memory - her mother's memory - and no one was paying her any mind. El watched with cautious intrigue as researchers she didn't recognize passed by. She recognized the room they were in and the large tank that her Papa was standing in front of. El furrowed her brow as one of the researchers assisted a young woman out of 'the bath' and her eyes widened as she realized that woman was Terry.

"Wonderful work, my dear," Brenner's slick voice encouraged her as she accepted a towel around her shoulders. Her eyes were vacant, pupils dilated as she sat on the metal landing with her long hair dripping over her shoulders. "You are contributing to historic research here,"

El blinked and suddenly she was in the darkness again.

"You were..." She began, looking up at her mother. "...in the bath...?"

Yes. Terry nodded. *I didn't know what I was doing. The lab offered money for research participants so I volunteered. It helped me through college until...*

El squinted curiously at her mother. Even if she was more communicative in this space, she was still difficult to read.

Before I knew about you. Terry made eye contact with El and it sent a shiver down the young girl's spine.

.....

El spent almost every afternoon with her new girl friends but it wasn't until the middle of the week that she remembered to ask them about coming to Dustin's birthday party the following weekend.

"Don't tell me not to live, just sit and *puttah*," Gabby was dramatically singing and acting out a song that El didn't know. The other girls seemed annoyed but El was fascinated. "Life's candy and the sun's a ball of *buttah*," As Gabby flitted around her bedroom like a butterfly, El wondered how she had so much energy. "Don't bring around a cloud to rain on my *paraaaaade!*"

"Alright!" Trish exclaimed, exasperated. "You sound fine! Can you *stop* now?"

"She's been doing this *all day*," Emma explained. "Ever since the flyer went up outside the theater room,"

"Auditions are on Friday," Gabby said, as though it was obvious. "That only gives me two days to prepare!"

"You've been singing that song at every talent show and birthday party since we were six," Trish retorted. "I *think*, you have a handle on it,"

"Birthday!" El exclaimed, remembering. Though she wasn't loud, the sudden statement still surprised her new friends.

"Yeah?" Trish quirked an eyebrow.

"My friends," El sunk back down into the blanket on Gabby's bed, suddenly self-conscious. "Um... Back in Hawkins. Want to come?" She looked around hopefully at the girls who exchanged curious looks.

"What friends?" Emma asked.

"Dustin's birthday party," El answered, counting names off on her fingers. "Dustin, Lucas, Will, Mike -"

"*Mike?*" Gabby exclaimed, her freckled face beaming with an impossibly wide grin. "We get to meet the infamous *Mike?*"

Gabby's reaction was making El blush but Emma patted her shoulder reassuringly. "You're sure your friend wouldn't mind you inviting us to their party?"

"They know we're girls, right?" Trish laughed. "Most boys our age don't want to hang out with girls,"

"They don't?" El asked, puzzled. She'd never gotten that impression from the boys. They seemed to enjoy spending time with her.

"Well, I mean, if they're your friends, I guess that's different," Trish backpedaled. "But they don't even know us,"

"I asked," El said confidently. "They said yes,"

Trish shrugged, "Okay. I'm down,"

"Oh man, I am so excited for this," Gabby crouched down, digging through albums beneath her record player. "Okay, so I was at the record store last weekend and I found something that *perfectly* fit you, El, okay?" She jumped up, record in hand as she switched out what was in the player for the one in the sleeve. El watched eagerly, wondering what could make Gabby so bubbly.

Emma watched quietly as Trish shook her head, rolling her eyes as Gabby bobbed up and down to an upbeat tune. El found herself bouncing along until Gabby started singing,

"*Oh Mikey, you're so fine, you're so fine you blow my mind! Hey Mikey!*" She grinned, putting emphasis on the word 'Mikey', and El's eyes widened dramatically. She could vaguely hear that those weren't the *exact* lyrics. She also wasn't sure why there would be a song about someone being 'fine' but the way Gabby was grinning while she sang at El made her blush regardless.

Trish stood up off the bed and reached past Gabby, turning the volume down. "*Must* you turn everything into a goddamn musical?"

"It was a joke, Trish," Gabby glared at her friend. "Don't get your panties in a twist,"

El just looked between the girls, lips pursed and eyes wide as she waited for some sort of explanation.

"Whatever," Trish rolled her eyes and flopped back onto the bed.

Gabby made a face at her friend before turning the volume back up and continuing to sing, "*Oh Mikey, what a pity you don't understand, you take me by the heart when you take me by the hand,*" Even though El felt a little awkward hearing Gabby pretend to sing about Mike, she thought it was neat how she could change her voice to mimic the woman on the record. She even laughed when Gabby grabbed her hand, acting out the lyrics. She almost reminded her of Mike and the way he could be really dramatic during D&D campaigns. "*Oh Mikey, you're so pretty, can't you understand -*"

El was just wondering if boys could also be pretty when Gabby's bedroom door flew open.

"Turn that shit *DOWN!*" A large man with coiffed grey hair and a tucked in button down shirt glared into the room. His voice was thunderous and all of the girls froze immediately. Without another word, he slammed the door shut and no one moved as his footsteps were heard clomping down the staircase.

Gabby's hands trembled as she stopped the record and El watched as Emma came up behind her, taking the sleeve that she was struggling to put the record into. "I've got it,"

"I um... I thought he was at work?" Trish said in a hushed voice and Gabby merely shrugged.

It was strange yet frightening seeing Gabby's bubbly and hyper demeanor shift so abruptly. El had yet to meet her father but given everything she'd heard, his explosive outburst had not been surprising.

Emma encouraged Gabby to sit on the bed with them and El recognized the fear in the redhead's eyes - the way her pupils dilated and her muscles seemed more rigid than normal.

"He hasn't done anything lately, has he?" Trish whispered, careful of her tone.

Gabby shook her head as Emma rubbed her back. "No, um, not lately,"

"Good," Trish said defiantly, shooting a glare at the closed bedroom door. "Asshole,"

Emma kicked Trish from across the bed. "Shut up!"

"It's the truth!" Trish defended, rolling back onto her back so that her head was next to Gabby's leg. She leaned against her friend. "I'm sorry,"

"It's fine," Gabby said, staring straight ahead, her chest rising and falling with each steadying breath.

El, not entirely sure what to do but following her instincts, crawled up behind Gabby and tentatively patted the girl on her back.

"So how about that party, El?" Trish broke the silence, sensing the need for a change in conversation.

"I've gotta ask my mom but I think I could come," Emma said, looking back at El as she rested her chin on Gabby's shoulder.

"I wanna go," Gabby whispered distantly and Trish patted her on the leg.

"You're gonna go," She said reassuringly, then turned to El with a smirk. "So tell us about Dustin and Lucas and Will, *oh my!*"

El smiled, happy to talk to her new friends about her first friends but also feeling like Trish had made some sort of joke that she didn't understand.

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The air was thick and El's short hair was slicked to her head in the moist, cold atmosphere. White particles floated past as she lifted her head from the ground on which she'd lain. She recognized the decaying earth, the vines that wrapped themselves around every living and non-living thing. Sitting up, El could barely see through the dense low-lying fog and the darkness that seemed to seep into her soul and set free every fear she'd kept buried deep.

Flashes of light and men's voices in the distance. El jumped up, her heart pounding in her chest as she recognized the suits in the distance.

Running faster. Faster. She couldn't go back. They wouldn't take her. She'd escaped. She couldn't go back.

Mike. Where was Mike? Oh, how she wished he was with her.

Run faster. Faster!

Twigs breaking beneath her bare feet, cutting into soft flesh and making her wince but she couldn't stop.

A strange sound in the distance. The Demogorgon? No, she'd killed it. It was dead. She'd torn it apart, piece by piece.

Something was wrong. Something bad was coming.

The men's voices were getting louder. They were getting closer.

She couldn't stop. Her muscles were cramping. So tired. Everything hurt. She needed to rest. Just for a minute.

No! Can't stop. Can't stop!

They were louder now. They were looking for her. They were going to find her and take her back to the lab.

Tears flooded her eyes as her chest burned from exhaustion. Keep running. Faster!

She could feel them behind her, gaining on her. They were so close she could feel their breath. A hand grabbing her shoulder...

El sat up with a jolt, panting, as the world around her transformed from the eerie Upside Down to her simple, quiet bedroom. A cold sweat beaded as her forehead as she calmed down, reminding herself that it was only a dream.

But it wasn't just a dream, was it?

El rolled onto her side, feeling around under her bed until she found it. Closing her eyes and focusing, she searched for him.

"Mike?" She whispered, her voice wavering as tears slid down her cheeks.

It only took him a moment to respond.

"El?" He didn't sound like he'd been sleeping even though it was close to midnight. "What's wrong? You sound upset,"

His words, the reality of her fears hit her and she struggled against choking sobs that forced their way out of her lungs. "Bad..." She managed between breaths. "Dreams,"

"Aw man," He sighed sympathetically. "That sucks. But hey, it's okay. It was just a dream, it wasn't real,"

El shook her head vehemently. "It's... real," She hiccuped. "I... I remember,"

Mike paused, trying to make the connection. "You remember... wait, is your memory coming back? From before?"

El nodded, tears flooding her eyes as she did her best to maintain the connection but being so upset made it difficult to keep her energy

focused. "Yes,"

"Wow," Mike breathed. "Okay... what do you remember? I mean... actually... don't tell me if it's gonna make you more upset, I guess?"

El inhaled deeply, trying to calm herself down. She knew she'd lose the connection if she didn't get herself under control. "Bad men," She replied, her words shaky and forced. "And... something bad,"

"Something bad?" Mike asked, confused. "More bad men?"

"No," El shook her head, exhaling slowly as her heart rate steadily declined.

"What else is bad?" He replied.

"I... don't know," El admitted, exhaling again and feeling like a deflated balloon as she finally felt the last of her anxiety subside.

"Um, okay," She could tell by his tone that he was becoming more perplexed the longer they spoke. She hated this feeling of helplessness when she didn't know what to say or do. "Well uh," He finally said after a minute. "You sound a little better now,"

El sighed. "Better,"

"Good," Mike smiled and she could hear it through the phone, imagining the way his lips curved and his cheeks got rounder when he was happy. "So um... there's something I've been wanting to ask you about actually... but y'know, with you not having your memory back and everything..." He trailed off and El waited patiently as she always did. "Anyway, um, this weird thing was happening while you were, you know, um, in the Upside Down... I had these weird dreams while you were missing," He stumbled through his words clumsily. "You know, before we found you... I um, were you doing that?" He blurted out, then added, "Talking to me in my dreams, I mean?"

El smiled to herself as the memories rolled in gently. "Yes,"

"Really?" Mike asked, excited. "I knew it. I knew I wasn't just imagining it! How were you doing that? I mean... have you always been able to do that?"

El paused. "I don't know..." To be honest, her recollection was still hazy, though she remembered searching for Mike at night and she remembered talking to him while she slept. She wasn't sure how she'd done it but she was quickly learning that she was capable of more than she ever realized if her interactions with Terry were any indication.

"Oh..." Mike sounded a little disappointed but he moved on quickly. "That's okay. Anyway, um, I should probably go to sleep," He sighed regretfully. "I have a test in the morning. But are you feeling okay now? I can stay up a little longer if you need me to,"

"I'm okay," She said quietly, smiling in the way only he could make her.

"Good," He said, yawning. "Call me if you have any more bad dreams, though,"

"Promise,"

.

"And I need you now tonight, and I need you more than ever. And if you only hold me tight, we'll be holding on forever..."

26. Eternal Flame

[A/N: AHHHHHHHH, I'm back! Sorry for taking so long - things have been pretty busy but the bright side is that I'm on spring break now (yay!) so I'm hoping to get at least a couple more updates in over the next week or so.

So about this chapter - it was supposed to have a few more scenes in it but so much ended up happening with THESE parts that I just decided to save the other stuff for next chapter. That being said, there are some cute moments and fun little slice of life type stuff that I hope you guys enjoy and it's also really long. Hopefully this makes up for my absence.

As always, please follow/favorite/leave some reviews so I know what you think! And thank you for all of the feedback you've left so far! You guys help keep me going :)]

Chapter 26: Eternal Flame (by The Bangles)

"Say my name, sun shines through the rain. A whole life so lonely, and then come and ease the pain..."

.....

By eight o' clock on Friday night, El's sleepover was in full swing and Hopper was second-guessing his decision to allow three additional kids to stay the night in his cramped trailer. Thankfully, they were now happily watching a Disney movie and eating pizza in the living area but he still couldn't wait for Joyce to arrive and help take some of the pressure off of him. Between the endless questions and requests and the loud chatter and laughter of the girls that seemed to magnify when they were in close proximity, Hopper was ready to call it a night already.

"Hey Chief!" Trish called from the living room. "Can we see your gun?"

"Not a chance," Hopper replied, tired but stern.

"Told you," Emma giggled.

"So are you like, El's dad?" Gabby asked as she fished another slice of pizza out of the box.

El looked up at Hopper with an interested expression. They'd pretended when they were in the hospital but she wasn't entirely clear on whether they were going to keep that up now that things had settled down.

"Why don't you take it easy on that pizza before you give yourselves heartburn," He said, avoiding the question just as a knock on the door echoed in the small space. "Thank god," Hopper muttered under his breath as he ushered Joyce in and took her coat.

Joyce grinned in amusement at him before turning her attention to the group of girls sitting in the living room.

"Hi El!" She said enthusiastically. "So these are your new friends?"

The girls quietly looked Joyce up and down, grinning at each other. El nodded to Joyce, oblivious to her friends' unspoken communication.

"Are you his girlfriend?" Trish asked with a mischievous grin, one eyebrow raised as she glanced between the two adults.

Joyce faltered for a second, blinking in surprise before expertly recovering. "No, sweetheart," She chuckled softly. "But I am a friend of El's and I thought I'd come by and hang out. Meet these new friends that El likes so much,"

The girls, no longer interested in the idea of Joyce and Hopper being an item, turned their attention back to the television screen.

El smiled and Joyce walked over to the couch where she was sitting to give her a greeting hug. "What are we watching?" Joyce asked, getting comfortable on the seat cushion as Hopper continued to stand in the doorway, arms crossed and relieved to have Joyce there. There was no question she was more comfortable with this. He'd had a daughter once but it'd been so long and he'd certainly never hosted a pre-teen sleepover. He couldn't help but smile as he watched Joyce

engage in the fast-paced girly chatter happening in his living room. Once she got there, the night seemed to fly by in a blur with the girls alternating between movies, eating, talking and playing games, and doing make-overs.

"Come *on*, Chief Hopper!" Gabby pleaded. "It'd be fun!"

"For you!" Hopper retorted. "You're not putting that stuff on my face,"

"What about your nails?" Trish suggested.

"What the hell is this fascination with putting make-up on me?" Hopper shot Joyce an incredulous look and the woman laughed, shaking her head and shrugging.

"You're no fun," Gabby jokingly pouted before shifting her focus to Emma's hair.

El was carefully painting her toenails, just like Trish had showed her, as Trish pulled Joyce's hair into a very messy braid over on the couch.

"I need to learn how to French braid," Gabby commented as she brushed Emma's hair and moved it in different directions, unsure what to do with the blonde locks.

"Here, come over here and I'll show you," Joyce waved the two girls over and Emma sat on the floor in front of Joyce while Trish continued to play with the older woman's hair as she sat on the back of the couch.

Gabby watched earnestly as Joyce explained and demonstrated the proper French braiding technique, pulling Emma's hair into a relatively neat and soft braid before letting go and letting Gabby give it a try.

The night continued in this way, with Hopper gradually agreeing to be roped into more activities at El and Joyce's encouragement. By midnight, the girls had finally retired to El's room with their sleeping bags. Whether they were asleep or not, Hopper and Joyce couldn't be sure but both were too tired to worry.

"God, I'm exhausted," Joyce said, leaning back against the couch cushion and letting herself sink in. "I worked a double today because Charlie called in sick this morning,"

"Damn, Joyce," Hopper shook his head, reclining back alongside her and fighting the urge to shut his eyes. "I didn't know that; you didn't have to come over,"

"Oh no, it's fine," Joyce hushed him with a wave of her hand. "It was nice. Seeing you finally give in and let El paint one of your nails was worth it," She shot a smirk at him, her eyes momentarily lifting just enough to make contact with his.

"Yeah, well..." He mumbled, glancing at his now pink thumb nail with a fond half-smile. "It's just the one," He yawned, letting his head sink back once more and marveling at the simple joy of his beat up old sofa as his eyelids grew heavier.

Quiet hung in the air for the first time that night as both independently tried to keep the incessant nag of sleep at bay. Neither could blame the other for being so exhausted. Joyce was working double shifts multiple times a week in an effort to keep her family afloat while Hopper juggled double lives between the police station and the lab. As the trailer grew quiet and the only sounds remaining were the steady tick of the clock on the wall and a chorus of crickets in the woods outside, the two adults fell into a deep, much needed sleep on the living room couch.

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"Ooooooooooooooh!" Trish and Gabby goaded from the doorway as all four girls entered the living room the following morning, clad in pajamas.

"Huh?" Hopper stirred. "Wha?"

He and Joyce had fallen asleep and slept through until morning, eventually moving closer over the course of the night such that Joyce's head was resting on Hopper's shoulder and his arm was around her.

"Not your girlfriend, huh?" Gabby laughed and El looked at the girls curiously. Sure, she'd never seen Hopper and Joyce so close together before but why was it so funny? And how did that make Joyce his 'girlfriend'? What *was* a 'girlfriend', anyway?

Gradually regaining his bearings as Joyce began to wake, Hopper realized what the girls were giggling about. "Shit," He muttered under his breath and quickly retracted his arm, shifting out from under Joyce as she began to return to consciousness. "What time is it?"

"10:30," Trish said, one eyebrow still raised in suspicious amusement at the adults.

"Alright, alright," Hopper said gruffly, standing up. "Nothin' to see here," He shooed them out of the room. "Go get dressed or somethin',"

"Oh god...I can't believe I fell asleep..." Joyce finally murmured, her eyes barely open as she groggily sat up, pawing at her pack of cigarettes on the coffee table until she secured them in her hand. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Hopper said briskly and stood up. "I'm gonna make breakfast," He started to make his way to the kitchen as Joyce lit her cigarette, then stopped in his tracks. He really didn't feel like cooking for six people and cooking wasn't even close to being his forte. "Screw it, on second thought, we're goin' to the diner,"

"I've gotta check on the boys," Joyce said, more alert now. "Can I use your phone?"

"Be my guest," Hopper gestured to the corded phone on the side table before disappearing into the bathroom.

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Hopper knew better than to take El to Benny's after everything that had happened back in the fall. Honeybee's Diner was a bit more out of the way but they had had time before they needed to be back in the area for Dustin's party so it wasn't a big deal. The only downside was being in the car with the four girls squeezed into the back of his SUV, chatting excitedly about anything and everything was giving

him a headache already. El was the quietest of the group which was no surprise, but she paid earnest attention to everything the others said.

There was a time when Hopper didn't get up before noon and now he was carting around a gaggle of pre-teen girls at 11 A.M. Strange how quickly things can change...

After checking on Will and Jonathan, Joyce had planned to head home. She felt guilty for staying out all night, even though it hadn't been intentional and she'd known Jonathan was home with Will. Hopper, however, had insisted that they get breakfast with them. Whether that was a token of appreciation for her coming over last night or a continued request for assistance with managing the girls, Joyce couldn't be sure. Still, it didn't take much coaxing to bring her along.

After filling up on generous portions of eggs, breakfast meats, and the biggest, fluffiest waffles El had ever seen, the group piled back into the car. To Hopper's relief, the girls were much calmer and quieter with full bellies so the car ride back to Hawkins was more peaceful.

"So are the girls staying for the weekend?" Joyce asked.

Hopper shook his head as he merged onto the highway. "Nah, Trish's mom is supposed to pick them all up later tonight. Apparently she works down this way every other weekend so Hawkins is a ten minute drive out of her way,"

"That's convenient," Joyce said, relaxing with an elbow up on the passenger side door.

"Yup," Hopper replied. "So how's everything going with you and the boys?"

"We're fine," Joyce said automatically but Hopper glanced at her, unconvinced. He knew she was exhausted and stressed and worried. She worked herself to the bone to keep life as stable as possible for her boys and that was something he really respected and admired about her. Despite everything she'd ever been through, she still had this incredible inner strength that sometimes left him in awe.

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El had never been to Dustin's house before. It was a modest one-level rancher with a small garden nestled against the base of the porch. A pair of blue and white balloons were tied to the black railing outside, blowing around gently in the wind. Despite the time of year and the temperature outside, the wind was relatively at ease today. Hopper stayed in the car, waiting to watch them go in. He'd already had a conversation with Dustin's mother the day beforehand and felt reasonably comfortable that El would be safe. Of course, he hadn't informed Dustin's mom of the specifics of El's situation but rather, had had the type of conversation any father would have with the people who would be watching his child for a few hours.

El could sense the nervous energy coming from her friends, though their slight smiles indicated they weren't terribly uncomfortable. El clutched a gift bag in her hand and Gabby carried the card they'd picked up and signed as a group on the way to Dustin's house. No one had realized until they were en route to the party that El hadn't brought a gift for Dustin which led to a conversation about events in which the proper etiquette is to bring someone a gift - like birthdays. So they'd taken a pit stop at a grocery store on the way and the girls had picked out what they could. Despite the last minute effort, El was pretty pleased with her selection.

For some reason, El had been expecting the party to only consist of people she knew. She'd never thought of the idea that Dustin could have other people there so when the girls walked into the house, ushered by Dustin's mom, and found a relatively large group of people in the living room, it was a bit overwhelming until the boys noticed her entrance.

"Hey El!" Mike greeted cheerily, his eagerness clearly noted by the girls who smirked at one another as they looked between El and Mike. Lucas stood by, rolling his eyes at his friend's lovestruck behavior and crossing his arms over his chest.

"Hi," El smiled warmly as the girls stopped in front of the moppy-haired pre-teen.

Waiting a beat, Trish piped up, "Okay, well, I'm Trish," She said

humorously.

"Oh duh," Mike shook his head. "Sorry, I'm Mike,"

"Lucas," Lucas lifted a hand and gave a small wave with a nod.

"It's *really* great to meet you," Gabby grinned at Mike, then shot a smirk at El that went unbeknownst to the oblivious young girl. "I'm Gabby and this is Emma," She gestured to the quiet blonde standing with them.

"Cool," Mike said, also not noticing the mischievous grins on El's friends' faces. "Um, so -"

"Hey, El's here!" Dustin remarked as he entered from the next room and immediately approached the group. "And... El's friends. Hi, El's friends," He said, lifting his eyebrows and giving a toothy smile.

"Gabby, Trish, Emma," El introduced, speaking each girl's name slowly and clearly as she pointed to them.

"Hi," The girls giggled. "Happy birthday,"

"This is for you... Dustin, right?" Gabby said, handing him the card.

"The one and only," He grinned. "Thanks,"

"And this," El said, putting the gift bag in his hands and watching with dismay as he sat it down in the corner where several other gift bags were gathered.

"Thanks, El!" Dustin said. "I'll open it later with the others, okay?"

Seemingly satisfied with this explanation, El looked around the room curiously. "Where is Will?" She asked, furrowing her brow with concern.

"He's on his way," Lucas explained nonchalantly. "Said he got caught up with something at home,"

"You don't think he's sick again, do you?" Dustin asked.

"Nah, he's been fine lately," Lucas said dismissively.

"Besides, he'd tell us if something was wrong," Mike said reassuringly and Lucas scoffed.

"Not necessarily..." Lucas retorted and Mike rolled his eyes.

"Anyway!" Dustin said, sensing the impending argument between two of his best friends. "So guess what? It's my *birthday*," He said with a dramatic joyfulness that was obviously an attempt at diverting the conversation topic as he draped his arms over Mike and Lucas' shoulders. "How *great* is *that*?"

The girls smirked at his theatrics as Mike and Lucas simultaneously rolled their eyes, moving on. Dustin noticed the way El continued to look around the room at the other people who were chatting with one another. There were a few adults sitting on and by the couch as well as two kids who may have been around their age over by the dining table getting snacks.

"Those are my cousins," Dustin said, following El's gaze and she visibly relaxed at the information. She was still distrustful of new people and wasn't sure if that instinct would ever go away. "And some of my aunts and uncles," He shrugged. "We're kind of close, I guess,"

El nodded her understanding and smiled slightly before directing her attention over the boys' shoulders to the snacks on the table.

"So anyway," Dustin said amicably. "There's plenty of food so dig in before it's gone," The girls began to encircle the food table as he continued. "Um, we're gonna go bowling after everybody eats and stuff,"

"Bowling?" El turned around and quirked an eyebrow.

"You've never been bowling?" Trish nudged her as she loaded cookies and a slice of pizza onto her plate. "How do you not know what *bowling* is?"

"There's a lot of stuff she hasn't done," Lucas chimed in. "You get used to it,"

"Apparently," Trish said, then added good-naturedly, "Girl, you've gotta get out more,"

The boys exchanged looks, privy to just how true that statement was, as El continued to look between her friends' faces with a confused expression.

"What is bowling?" She pushed, layering two slices of pizza onto her plate and making eye contact with Mike. He always had answers for her.

"It's a game," Mike, reliable as ever, explained. "You roll a heavy ball down a lane and try to knock down as many pins at the end as you can,"

"Pins?" El squinted her eyes.

"Yeah, you'll see," Mike said. "It's hard to explain without showing you, I guess,"

The rest of their time spent at Dustin's house went by quickly. After everyone ate their fill, Dustin's mom corralled everyone into the living room to watch as Dustin opened his gifts. It was certainly a fascinating sight for El, watching her friend opened gift bags and tore wrapping paper from boxes as the people surrounding him watched. Everyone wanted to see what he received, especially the people who had given him whatever gift he was currently opening. That she could understand, as she had been hoping he would look at the gift she'd picked as soon as she handed him the bag. As Dustin sat on the couch, his relatives and friends surrounding him, his mom stood back taking pictures each time he picked up a new item.

"Don't forget to read the cards, Dustin," She'd reminded him and he deadpanned slightly but dug the card out of the bag and continued to make an effort to read the cards first.

El wondered if her new friends were having a good time. They hadn't done much yet but she was so used to them being more talkative and outgoing. Maybe they felt the same way she did when it came to meeting new people and they would get more comfortable as the day went on. They didn't seem to be unhappy, just more quiet, so that

had to be what was going on.

Meanwhile, Mike was paying an exorbitant amount of attention to the positioning of El's hand. They were squeezed together on the end of the couch with Dustin and two of his cousins, with Dustin on the far end opening gift after gift and their other friends gathered around, some of them sitting on the floor in front of them, others leaning against or around the side of the couch. Will had finally arrived just before it was time to open gifts and was now seated on the carpet just inches from Mike's foot. With these close quarters, Mike couldn't help but pay attention to how close El was to him. Her hands clutched the edge of the couch on either side as she watched Dustin intently. How easy would it be to hold her hand? A nagging inside him told him to act on his impulses and pick up her hand. It wouldn't be the first time, after all and she would probably like it, right? He always second-guessed himself about these kinds of things, even after countless instances of not being rejected by her. It probably wasn't a big deal and who knows? Maybe she would look at him and smile and everything would be fine. Still, the anxiety of being so close to her and doing something so affectionate in front of all of these people was enough to make him sweat.

El bubbled with excitement as she watched Dustin pick up the gift she'd brought. While she hadn't had much time to put a lot of thought into this last minute decision, based on what she knew of Dustin, she thought he would like it nonetheless.

"I think that one's from El," Lucas laughed, noting the way El squirmed in her seat with anticipation, her face beaming.

"Okay," Dustin said, reading through the card from the girls at his mother's behest before digging a box of Nilla Wafers and a small Stormtrooper toy out of the bag. "Dude," He laughed, holding up each item. "This is awesome. Thanks, El, and thanks for the card," He acknowledged the other girls who gave slight nods and smiles.

El's smile stretched from ear to ear as Mike patted her on the back. "Good choices," He chuckled.

After Dustin had opened all of his gifts, everyone made arrangements as to how they would get to the bowling alley. Between his mom's

minivan that she used for work, his dad's car, and his relatives that chose to ride along in their own vehicles, they were able to make it work. Dustin, Mike, Will, Gabby and El traveled with Dustin's mom while Lucas, Trish, and Emma rode with one of Dustin's cousins in his dad's car.

The bowling alley was unlike anything El had ever experienced before and the sound of the heavy balls colliding with the floor startled her at first but all of her friends seemed to understand the procedure and were at ease in this place so she relaxed quickly.

The main lights were turned down relatively low in this place and bright, colorful lights added a playful feel to the space as Madonna hits played from unseen speakers. After getting their shoes, El followed everyone down to the lanes where each pair of lanes had its own table and wrap-around bench for bowlers to wait their turn. They'd rented four lanes with Dustin's relatives and parents playing against one another in one pair, leaving the boys and the girls to divvy up their teams.

"Do you wanna be on my team, El?" Mike asked and Dustin pretended to stick a finger down his throat in disgust, making Gabby laugh.

"Uh-uh," Lucas protested. "No way, you guys are just gonna be all over each other and won't actually play the game,"

"Not true!" Mike argued.

"I say we do guys versus girls," Lucas went on, ignoring Mike's protest.

"Wait a minute," Trish countered. "That's not fair!"

Lucas smirked at her. "It's only unfair if you think you're gonna *lose*,"

That earned him a challenging look from the wavy-haired brunette. "Oh *hell* no," She narrowed her eyes, matching his smirk. "Okay, you're on, Sinclair,"

Mike and Dustin exchanged amused looks as the other girls confidently backed up their friend's challenge.

"This should be good," Dustin laughed and everyone made their way to a cart with bowling balls of varying colors and weights as Will took a seat at the scoring table, entering everyone's names into the system so they would show up on the overhead screen.

"Hey," He caught Emma's attention just before she followed the others over to the cart, offering an apologetic smile. "Sorry, I didn't get your name?"

"It's Emma," The blonde smiled shyly, watching as he typed the letters.

"Cool, thanks," Will said amicably, looking back up at her before she left to go pick her bowling ball.

"There are different colors but they're also different weights," Mike explained to El who was listening patiently and eyeing her options thoughtfully. "Like this green one," He picked up a large marble green ball with the number '25' on it. "It's kinda heavy," He said, not anticipating the weight when he picked it up to demonstrate, but pretending to struggle less than he actually was before returning it to the cart. "Um," He said, exhaling. "So yeah, you just pick whichever one feels right, I guess,"

"Dude," Dustin nudged Mike and whispered. "Knowing El, the weight of the ball is probably not even going to matter,"

"Shh," Mike shushed him quietly, gesturing with his eyes to the girls who weren't too far out of earshot, even despite his whispering. They may be friends but they probably didn't know about El's powers and the last thing Mike wanted was to blow her cover.

El finally decided on a bright pink 8 pound ball, proudly cradling it in her arms as she waited for Mike to select his.

"Did you paint your nails?" Mike asked curiously, noticing the light pink shade on her nails as she held her bowling ball in her hands.

El glanced at her hands, then nodded. "Pretty?"

"Um, yeah," Mike nodded, a strange feeling moving through him as he realized El was starting to branch out into more things that he

hadn't been the one to introduce her to - not that he could've seen himself being the one to tell her about painting her nails. But still, as dumb as it sounded, it was like she was a real *girl* and seeing her that way made him feel simultaneously proud, excited, and nervous.

"Are you guys ready yet?" Lucas called impatiently from the score table where Will had finally finished adding everyone's names which were now displayed on the monitors above their lanes.

"We're coming!" Mike said as he and El joined the rest of their group down by the lanes.

By the middle of the first game, the teams were neck and neck with the boys having a slight lead over the girls. El had already tried using her powers to keep her ball from going into the gutter but the boys quickly and discreetly called her out on it and explained that it was not okay. Since then, she'd gotten better but was still getting relatively frequent gutter-balls, as was Emma. Trish and her competitive nature were carrying the team along and while Gabby had a decent level of skill, she was more caught up in singing and dancing along to the tracks playing from the speakers.

"Get into the groove, boy, you've got to prove your love to meeee..." Gabby sang, doing a little dance move as she walked back to the bench, not even watching her ball complete its descent down the lane but smirking when she heard pins fall.

"Does she always do that?" Lucas remarked and Trish nodded.

"All the time," She laughed, patting the boy on the shoulder. "Welcome to my world,"

As the song shifted and a new one came on, Dustin let out an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Finally something other than Madonna!"

"Oh, I know this one, too!" Gabby, not hearing their conversation, said with delight from her place at the bench with El.

"I like your singing," El said quietly, offering a small smile to which Gabby lit up.

"Thanks!" The redhead beamed. "You should come see *Funny Girl*,

you know, assuming I didn't bomb the audition,"

"Okay," El nodded.

"Wait, Funny Girl as in the musical?" Dustin said, entering the conversation.

"Yeah..." Gabby eyed him curiously. "You know it?"

"Sort of," Dustin shrugged, sitting down on the bench next to her. "I was on the crew when our school did it last year,"

"Oh wow," Gabby said, interested. "That's cool. So you helped out with the set, I guess?"

"Basically," Dustin nodded. "I've done plays and stuff before but there wasn't really a part in that one that I wanted to do,"

Gabby's face brightened. "Wow, I wouldn't have pegged you for the acting type,"

"You mean after meeting me an hour ago?" Dustin grinned and Gabby laughed.

"Fair point," She conceded, suddenly feeling bashful and looking down just as Will called her up for her turn.

El watched curiously as Dustin's gaze followed Gabby up to the lanes. The way he was looking at her was unlike any expression she'd seen on him before and reminded her of the way she sometimes looked at Mike.

"You crush her," She said confidently, raising an eyebrow at the boy who jumped as though he'd been pricked.

"What?" He said, dumbfounded. "What does that - *no*, no, I don't," Dustin contested emphatically before standing up abruptly and walking away as El smirked to herself.

The rest of the afternoon seemed to fly by. They dug into the cake Dustin's mom had brought after the first game and went on to play two more to settle the score.

"The first game doesn't count," Lucas insisted as Trish stood by, arms crossed.

"You're just mad because we won," She countered.

"You only won by two points!" Lucas retorted. "And that's only 'cause El cheated in the first game!"

"Bull," Trish said dismissively. "Don't be a sore loser,"

"Are you guys seriously not gonna do anything about this?" Lucas turned to the guys, hoping for some back up.

"Dude, it's just a game," Dustin chuckled.

"It was really close," Will said, trying to be the peacemaker. "What if we just said it was a tie?"

"Hell no," Trish disputed. "We earned those points,"

"Nice try, Will," Mike nudged his friend empathetically.

"What part of 'cheating' do you not understand?" Lucas exclaimed, gesturing exaggeratedly. "We need another game,"

"Okay, how did she cheat?" Trish said, hands on hips. "Please, because *I* didn't see anything, did you guys?" She looked to Gabby and Emma who shook their heads while El watched the argument unfold with concern, making eye contact with Mike. She knew the instance Lucas was referring to was the one turn in which she used her powers to get a strike, not realizing that that decision would be the move that gave the girls a win in the first game. And while Lucas was avoiding explicitly stating *how* she 'cheated', she was still getting a little nervous.

"Okay, guys," Mike said, stepping in. "It doesn't matter," He turned his back to the girls, giving a pointed look to Lucas just as Dustin's mom called them over to follow along as they got ready to leave.

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The contention between Lucas and Trish waned after they arrived at

a local ice cream parlor just a few minutes from the bowling alley. By the time the group stepped foot in the quaint little building, everyone was in positive spirits, cracking jokes and having pleasant conversation. Dustin's extended family had gone home so it was only his parents accompanying them, generously offering to buy each of the kids a treat of their choosing.

The 'Ice Cream Cottage' was a small shop run by a family who always seemed to remember the people who came in, even if it had been a while since their last visit. Perhaps that was the result of living in a small town like Hawkins. There was a wooden deck outside the building with chairs that rocked back and forth and a small patch of land to the side with several picnic tables that were often used during warmer months when large groups of kids would congregate here for the better part of the day. To the side of the deck and under a large oak tree was a two-seat wooden swing with a green and white awning.

"Why are we getting ice cream at the end of *January*?" Trish wondered aloud as they stepped into the building, shaking off the chill of outside.

"There is never a bad time to have ice cream," Gabby said definitively, stepping up to the freezer to consider her options.

"Truer words have never been spoken," Dustin nodded thoughtfully, also stepping up alongside her to read the names of the different flavors the shop offered.

The ice cream freezer had clear glass such that they could easily see each flavor as well as the name of it which was taped to the glass. On the other side of the shop, booths with checker boards built into the tabletops were painted in primary colors with small wooden boxes of checkers pieces for patrons to play while they ate. The shop was empty at the moment, probably due to the time of year and infrequent patronage that came with the colder months.

As everyone stood in line to place their orders, El had yet to shake off the cold since coming inside so she stepped up behind Mike, wrapping her arms around him in a hug and resting her cheek on his shoulder. Of course, she didn't think much of this gesture and was

used to being close to Mike. The added benefit of latching onto some of his warmth didn't seem like a strange thing to her so she was relatively oblivious to the reactions of their friends that ranged from giggles to smirks to eye-rolls.

Mike wasn't sure how to respond to such a blatantly public display of affection so he awkwardly patted her arm and tried to ignore the way that even the teenage girl putting everyone's ice cream cones together seemed to be grinning in amusement at them.

"Aww, look," Trish remarked. "They love each other,"

El thought about asking what 'love' meant but judging by Trish's tone and the way Mike had almost frozen in her arms, she thought it may be best to save that question for later.

Mike stood steady through his embarrassment, the bright red flushing of his cheeks a stark contrast to the typical pale tone of his skin. However, when he was asked for his order, his unsteady awkwardness became more apparent.

"Uh, the uh," He stammered even as El clung to his arm, still trying to decide on a flavor. "R-Rocky road, um, please?"

"What kind of cone?" The girl behind the counter asked, trying not to look as entertained as she was.

"Waffle," He squeaked and El looked at him.

"Like Eggos?" She asked, her eyes wide with wondrous delight.

"Oh, yeah," Mike said, nodding. "You should get yours in a waffle cone, too. I think you'd like it,"

El couldn't look any more assured if she tried. "Chocolate," She said eagerly, though still in the soft, quiet way that was her nature. "And waffle cone,"

The employee nodded her understanding and Mike thanked her as she began to put their cones together.

"So did you ask him yet?" Gabby blurted to El once everyone had

their cones and settled into a couple of booths.

El furrowed her brow in confusion as she greedily dug into her ice cream before remembering what Gabby was referring to.

"Oh," She said, her eyebrows lifting with realization as she turned to Mike. "There's a dance,"

"Yeah?" Mike looked at her with interest, having a feeling he knew where this was going and feeling excited yet completely awkward at the same time. This wouldn't be so uncomfortable if he didn't have Gabby and Dustin's eyes on him and their other friends easily within earshot in the next booth.

"The Sadie Hawkins dance at our school," Gabby filled in, still eagerly watching El.

El nodded, looking down shyly and Mike tried not to smile as hard as his face was attempting to. "... Do you want to go?"

"Um," He glanced at Gabby and Dustin who were staring at both of them with anticipation, their mouths slightly agape as they eagerly watched the interaction. "Okay," Mike focused on El, tuning out the incredibly distracting reactions of the two people across from them and fighting against the way his cheeks threatened to pinken. "Yeah, that sounds fun. Thanks for inviting me, El,"

"Yes!" Gabby squeaked with delight and Dustin jumped at the sudden sound next to him before laughing.

"Um, alright," He joked. "There goes the hearing in *that* ear,"

"Sorry," Gabby giggled, returning her attention to Mike and El. "This is gonna be so much fun," She leaned around the side of the booth. "Did you hear that?" She asked Emma and Trish.

"Kind of hard not to," Trish replied sarcastically, grinning.

El tapped the table in front of Gabby to get her attention. "Can everyone go?"

Gabby's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Um, I... guess?" She turned to

Dustin, sharing a mutually uncomfortable look with him before both darted their eyes away. "Like as a group?"

El nodded happily. "Yes,"

"Sure, if they want," Gabby replied, notably avoiding looking directly at Dustin again. Thankfully, El and Mike looked at him, eliciting a response.

"Uhh... okay," He agreed, still looking relatively uncomfortable.

Gabby turned around in her seat again to speak to Trish. "Looks like we're all going,"

"All of us?" Will asked. "To the dance at your school?"

"What if we don't want to?" Lucas challenged and Dustin got up on his knees in his seat, leaning over the back of the booth to face them.

"You are *not* ditching us," He said, giving a pointed, somewhat desperate and anxious look.

"See?" Trish jerked a thumb up at Dustin and shot Lucas a playful smirk, her sarcasm as thick as ever. "You guys can be each other's dates,"

Lucas glared at her, digging into his bowl of chocolate chip ice cream. "You're actually really annoying, you know that?"

Undeterred, Trish sat back in her seat, still smirking at him as Will and Emma quietly exchanged glances. "I prefer to think of myself as quite endearing, actually,"

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"Close your eyes, give me your hand. Do you feel my heart beating? Do you understand? Do you feel the same?"

27. I Want To Know What Love Is

Chapter 27: I Want To Know What Love Is (by Foreigner)

"In my life, there's been heartache and pain. I don't know if I can face it again. Can't stop now, I've traveled so far to change this lonely life..."

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Earlier that afternoon

He knew he was going to be late. The painful twisting and turning of his stomach, however, made it difficult to think of anything other than the ever familiar question of whether he was going to vomit. Jonathan was in the next room listening to music, unaware of his current state. He'd already called Dustin's house, letting his mom know he was running behind and leaving it at that. His own mom had called earlier that morning but he hadn't had the opportunity to spend much time thinking about how weird it was that she stayed the whole night at Chief Hopper's house, even if she was helping with El's sleepover. Shortly after his mom had called, the pain and nausea had resurfaced but he had yet to vomit like usual.

It'd been a long time since he'd thrown up any slugs, or flashed into the Upside Down. Things had actually been pretty stable and he'd thought that he was past... whatever this was. As he sat on the edge of the tub, the toilet bowl in front of him as he waited to see what his body would do, the only thing he could think of was how frustrated he was that he was experiencing these feelings again. When would it end? And how long could he keep this from his family? Would he actually be able to get past this without them finding out? His mom was still working all the time and Jonathan was busy with work, school, and his application to NYU. He didn't want to burden them with this but the fact that this nausea had resurfaced brought up the idea of reconsidering.

After spending a half hour in the bathroom, the nausea finally subsided without event and Will stood up in front of the sink, dipping a hand towel under the faucet to wipe the sweat from his brow. Maybe this was a fluke. He didn't actually puke this time, after all. Or

maybe it was completely unrelated and he'd actually eaten something that didn't agree with him. He could hold off on alarming anyone for now.

.....

"I can't believe you roped us into going to some random school dance in Clarksville," Lucas said to El after Trish's mom picked the girls up from the Ice Cream Cottage in the early evening.

El merely offered a slight, innocent smile. Dustin's parents had headed home without them since they'd wanted to hang out a bit longer and the shop was a short walking distance from Dustin's house. They were all settled into one booth now with Dustin having pulled up a chair from a nearby table, turning it backwards and sitting with his arms crossed over the back of it.

"Yeah," Dustin agreed. "Really awkward,"

El shot him a knowing smirk and his eyebrows lifted.

"No," He said adamantly. "*No*, and don't even say it,"

"What?" Mike looked between El and Dustin in confusion. "What's he talking about El?"

"*Nothing*," Dustin interjected, his eyes wide as he zeroed in on El, communicating under the radar. "That's why she's not saying anything because there is *nothing* to say, right El?"

"Friends don't lie..." El said to Dustin and he shook his head.

"It's not *lying* if there is *nothing* to say," Dustin said firmly.

"What the hell is going on?" Lucas asked. "You guys are being really weird,"

El pursed her lips, looking between Dustin and Lucas as Lucas and Mike looked back and forth at them, waiting for an explanation. Will was quietly watching the conversation.

Dustin groaned in frustration. "El thinks something that is not true

and so that is why we're not talking about it, okay? Moving on -"

"Well, what is it?" Mike asked, his curiosity piqued.

Dustin growled again, pulling at his curly locks and slouching over the back of his chair.

"Is it about Gabby?" Will asked, his voice a strange sound after having been quiet for so long.

The way Dustin looked like a deer caught in headlights gave him away.

"Wait, do you like Gabby?!" Mike asked animatedly, blinking as El's grin widened.

"No," Dustin protested, though even against his modestly tan complexion, his blush was noticeable.

"Bull," Mike called him out. "You're lying,"

"Look, it's still my birthday," Dustin said, trying a different angle to redirect the conversation. "And I say we talk about something else. Literally anything. How about a new D&D campaign; got anything in mind, Mike?"

"Man, now *both* of you are gonna get all girl crazy and weird," Lucas complained, sinking back into the booth.

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Mike retorted defensively.

"I think you know what it means," Lucas replied as though it was blatantly obvious. "As much of a pain in the ass as Trish was, she got one thing right and that was what she said about *you two*,"

That jogged El's memory. "Love?" She questioned, looking around at each of the boys who simultaneously looked uncomfortable and like they could burst into laughter at any moment. Except Mike who only looked uncomfortable and embarrassed. "What is love?" El asked, his eyes wide and waiting for an answer.

"You wanna take this one, Mike?" Lucas said, gesturing to El and

watching with interest.

"I-It's uh," Mike began but the way his friends were staring at him was too much. "I'll um, I-I'll tell you later, okay?"

"How romantic," Dustin chortled, batting his eyelashes.

"Shut up," Mike snapped. "Or do we need to bring up Gabby again?"

"*God dammit!*"

.....

Another night of blowing Steve off. How long could she keep this up? As Nancy tried to focus on her history homework, her mind would betray her and wander toward thoughts of Jonathan - the way he'd tried to keep her from falling in the snow and the feeling she'd gotten when they'd been chest to chest, dangerously close. It was as if some sort of magnet had been pulling her in closer and the effect was dizzying.

But this was Jonathan Byers. *Jonathan Byers*. Her brother's best friend's brother. The quiet, kind of weird guy who was always taking pictures at all of their school functions but was never *in* any of them. The one who never really talked to anyone at school and usually seemed to slip into the background like a shadow.

It was also the guy who'd helped her fight the 'Demogorgon' as her brother and his friends called it. He was one of the very few people who understood the grief she was going through with Barb and that actually cared enough to listen. The one who had stayed with her overnight after she'd first encountered that monster and the threat of nightmares kept her from getting any kind of sleep that night.

But being with Steve made *sense*. They had similar interests... didn't they? They liked to go to the movies, attend sporting events at school, and just do *normal* things. At least... she *used* to like those things. Now everything felt... upside down, for lack of a better term. And besides, she liked Steve before and just because she was going through something right now, that didn't mean anything had to change, did it? She could get through her grief and make sense of

whatever strange feelings she was having for Jonathan, right?

But that meant she would have to admit that she had feelings for Jonathan...

.....

Flashback

Sarah was awake when the call came in on a line at the nurses' station so Hopper excused himself to take it.

"Be right back," He said, kissing the top of her hairless head and offering her a comforting smile before stepping out of the room and leaving his wife to entertain her in his absence.

"This is Detective Hopper," Hopper said, picking up the receiver the nurse offered him and leaning against the countertop overlooking the nurses' desks.

"Good afternoon, Detective," A man's voice on the other line said. "My name is Dr. Robison. I'm one of the lead researchers at Hawkins National Laboratory. I'm glad we caught you. Jodie Markham said that you were interested in participating in some of the children's cancer research we have been conducting,"

"The nurse, right?" Hopper clarified. "Yeah, she um, our daughter, I mean... she's not doing so well and the nurse - Jodie - said you guys might be able to help her?"

"Well, there are no guarantees with experimental research, of course," Dr. Robison said. "But if you'd like to bring her in for testing, we can see if she meets our study's qualifications and go from there,"

"Yes," Hopper said immediately. "Yes, we can do that,"

After tying up a few details with Dr. Robison, Hopper returned to Sarah's room with a pep in his step. At last, there was hope. It was slim and he knew it was a long shot but there was someone offering him more than an expiration date for his daughter.

"Diane," Hopper said from the doorway, nodding for her to come outside

for a moment.

Diane pursed her lips, squeezing her daughter's hand and standing up. "I'll be right back, sweetie,"

Once they were out in the hall, Hopper spoke in a hushed voice. "We've got an appointment," He said excitedly. "They can see her this Thursday,"

"Wait, you want to take her out of the hospital?" Diane clarified, dumbfounded. "Hopper, she's sick. We can't move her,"

"She's stable, Diane," Hopper said. "The doctors said she has months and it's not like they intend on keeping her here for that whole time. But if we do this, she could have more than months, Diane. She could have years. They could fix her,"

"You don't know that, Jim," Diane said warily. "You know how bad her situation is and we don't even know if the procedure would do anything,"

"But isn't it worth a shot?"

.

Sunday was a dreary day. The sky was overcast and while the air had warmed slightly since the snowfall a few days prior, rainclouds had brought a storm that left everything feeling colder and more bleak. After having swapped her usual school day for Dustin's birthday, El had spent the majority of Sunday working in her school books with Hopper. He'd made a copy of the multiplication table in one of her textbooks and that had really been helping her start to memorize them. Her favorite part of the afternoon, however, had been getting to chose a book to read from the selection she'd picked out from the library.

Hopper had sat with her on the couch, helping her with any words she struggled with, but mostly letting her try on her own. While she fumbled several times, she was steadily making progress and the fact that she was enjoying reading made it feel less like work. The whole situation felt surreal, however, as Hopper recalled the countless times he'd sat with his own daughter, just like this, reading stories to her and helping her to recognize different letters and pictures in the

books they chose. A pang of regret and grief struck his chest but El's quiet, steady voice trudging through the content of her latest selection helped to ground him.

After El had gone back to Clarksville that night, Becky seemed exhausted. Terry wasn't in the living room so El could assume she was in her bedroom by this time of night.

After taking her nightly shower, El came downstairs to the kitchen for a snack, finding Becky at the table with a lowball glass and a bottle of whiskey in front of her.

"Hey Ellie," Becky said in a tired voice but El could tell she was trying to be more enthusiastic than she felt. "How was the party yesterday?" She inquired, turning in her chair to face El who cautiously approached the table and sat down.

"Fun," She said quietly with a small smile, making eye contact for a brief moment before glancing at the alcohol in Becky's glass.

"I'm glad," Becky smiled, her eyes half-lidded with fatigue as she lifted her glass to her lips and took a sip. "Did all your friends get along?"

El considered this for a moment. Even despite Trish and Lucas' bickering, they'd gotten along for the most part. She nodded.

"Good," Becky said, nodding in response. "I'm sorry I'm a little tired tonight," She said, exhaling. "It's been a long weekend,"

El eyebrows stitched together. By now she knew that when Becky sat and drank in the kitchen, she was either brutally exhausted or upset about something. She wondered if something had happened while she was gone. "Are you... okay?" She asked tentatively. Between spending time with so many different people and practicing her reading with Hopper, she was starting to become a little more comfortable with speaking in more than one or two word sentences, though she was still somewhat shy about it.

"I'm fine," Becky smiled at her niece. "Terry - er, your mom, had a little bit of a breakdown today but it's not a big deal," She noted the

concerned expression on El's face. "She's fine, don't worry. She just got freaked out or something earlier tonight when it was time for her bath so I had to calm her down and help her. Nothing for you to worry about, okay?"

El reluctantly nodded, shifting her attention back to the whiskey in Becky's hand and pointing to the glass. "Why?"

Becky followed her gaze and swirled the alcohol in her glass. "It helps me relax sometimes," She answered simply. "But hey, enough about me, okay? You're the one that had the fun weekend. You gonna tell me about it?"

El shrugged, smiling as she recalled the fun she had with her friends and the moments she shared with Mike that made her chest feel warm and fuzzy. "We're going to a dance,"

"A dance?" Becky blinked, smiling. "Where at?"

"Clarksville,"

"Ahh, at the girls' school?" Becky surmised. "That sounds fun. All of you are going? The boys, too?"

El nodded, the smile on her face widening and uncontainable.

"Well, I'll be damned," Becky said, setting her glass down on the table. "I guess this means we've got some things to figure out, huh?"

El looked up at her aunt with interest.

"Well, you need a dress and we'll do your hair -"

"I have a dress," El said, recalling one that she'd bought on her shopping trip with Nancy.

"Okay, great," Becky said nonchalantly. "Wow, though... your first dance," She sat back in her chair, looking at El and smiling. "That's gonna be a lot of fun,"

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As El snuggled up in her blankets that night, the call of sleep coaxing her away, she reflected on everything that had happened that weekend. Once she'd finally relaxed into the now familiar pillows and mattress, she realized how worn out she actually was. She couldn't have imagined the weekend going any better and she felt an overwhelming sense of comfort and happiness at the fact that her friend group was growing. She still felt a little odd, a little out of place, but her life was beginning to become more predictable and that made her feel safe. Being surrounded by people who really seemed to like and care about her only made it better.

The last thing that crossed her mind as she transitioned from wakefulness into sleep was that word Trish had used. What exactly did 'love' mean? She'd heard it a few times in reference to family and movies and foods but what did Trish mean when she said it about her and Mike? And why had the word made Mike act so strange? It somehow seemed different in that context but she wasn't sure why. If it was like movies and food, that would mean that if you love something, it's your favorite. She'd already decided that Mike was her favorite person and subsequently, her 'crush', so did that mean she loved Mike? There had to be more to it but she didn't have much time to think about it before she finally drifted off into a peaceful slumber.

.....

"I want to know what love is, I want you to show me..."

[A/N: So what do you guys think so far? Some things I'm wondering about: What do you think of El's new girl friends? What do you think of the flashbacks with Hopper and his daughter? What about the Jancy situation? What's happening to Will? And what's going on at the lab? There is so much going on! Leave a review and tell me your thoughts and predictions! :) Thanks for reading!]

28. Is This Love?

[A/N: Oh man, y'all... I wasn't planning on posting again this quickly but I gave myself feels with this chapter... Hope you like it!]

Chapter 28: Is This Love? (by Whitesnake)

"I should have known better than to let you go alone. It's times like these I can't make it on my own. Wasted days and sleepless nights, and I can't wait to see you again..."

.....

It was hard not to think about the stuff his friends had said at the ice cream shop. As the night rolled on, Mike lay in bed, hands cradling the back of his head, reflecting on the events of the day.

Interestingly enough, he and El would be going to their first school dance together sooner than he anticipated and she'd beaten him to the punch by being the one to ask. He certainly hadn't seen that one coming but he couldn't say he wasn't happy about it and that didn't mean he wouldn't get *his* chance to ask her when the Spring Fling rolled around at his school.

Lights from the streetlights outside peeped in through the venetian blinds on his window and his eyes adjusted to the dimness in the room after a while. How strange it was that when El was gone, he couldn't wait to get to sleep in the hope of dreaming of her yet with her regularly in his life again and things going well, he had such a hard time turning his mind off. Especially as one small word buzzed around his head.

Love.

He wasn't even sure what to think of that, honestly. He knew it was a big deal and too often people threw that word around for nothing. He wanted her to understand what it meant but he wasn't even entirely sure that *he* did. And he didn't want her to get the wrong idea or get confused or weirded out. It was too important.

How did he feel, though? He'd always heard adults tell kids his age that they were too young to actually know what love was. And considering he had essentially zero experience with girls, he obviously didn't have anything personal to compare it to. But what he shared with El, whatever it was, was special. He treasured her and would do just about anything to make sure she was safe. But was that love or was that being a good person? He couldn't be sure. Then again, he tried to imagine fighting a futile fight with an interdimensional monster or standing up to cold-blooded government agents with guns for anyone else and he just couldn't see it. Maybe his family and his close friends but he couldn't think of anyone else. Still, wasn't it reasonable to say that everything he'd done for El, he would have done for any good friends? Or someone in need? It made sense but didn't explain the feelings he felt around El.

It was obvious he had a crush - he'd had plenty of those before, albeit, none that had been well-received. In fact, he'd never even had a close friendship with a girl before El so the entire experience was new for him. Most girls, whether he'd liked them or not, had thought he was weird or too nerdy. But El didn't care and that was part of what had set down the groundwork for their current relationship. She didn't know, or at least didn't seem to care, that most other kids at school thought he was a loser. She somehow seemed to get it, get *him*, even despite her past. But how did someone draw the line between a crush and something more? And what could he do about it? *Should* he do anything about it?

He tried to calm his excited mind. It was already quite late and he had school in the morning. For now, he could be satisfied that things were going well and he didn't necessarily have to have everything all figured out. Things were okay as they were - El was back in their lives and her living arrangement had proven to be stable, all of his friends were together and even Will seemed to be doing better. No monsters, no government agencies trying to hurt them, and the most he had to worry about was school bullies - though, since El's altercation with them, Troy and James had been keeping their distance. With a final sigh, Mike let himself drift off into sleep, content that his life had not only gone back to normal but that things were possibly even better than before.

.....

They were only a couple of weeks away from the Sadie Hawkins Valentine's dance but the excitement was cut short when Gabby apparently came to school on Monday with a broken wrist and a remarkably different, though familiar, attitude. Rather than go over to her house after school, Trish and Emma had escorted her to El's and the four had walked to Trish's house, not too far away.

"What happened?" El had asked, pointing to Gabby's wrist, but when no one responded right away, she decided not to push. The looks on their faces weren't good. They reminded her of the way they'd looked when she'd asked about Gabby's burn scars and when her father had burst into her room to yell at them, and the way Mike had looked after Troy hurt him at recess.

Trish lived in a big brown Victorian about a quarter mile away, amidst several other houses in similar styles. Her older sister was already away at college so it was just her and her parents in the charming old home.

"I'm home, Mom!" Trish called into the empty foyer as the four girls entered. "We're going to my room!" She called out, despite having received no response. "Come on," Trish said, leading the girls up an elegantly detailed wooden staircase and down the hall to what El deduced was Trish's room.

The walls were painted violet and several posters with people El didn't recognize adorned the room from every angle. There was a full size bed in the middle of the room with a crocheted blanket laying overtop the larger quilt and dirty clothes and other random objects were haphazardly strewn all over the floor. Trish tossed her backpack into a corner and went over to the window, the wood frame creaking softly as she opened it.

Gabby sat down quietly on Trish's bed and Emma plopped down next to her, rubbing her friend's back as Gabby stared down with a vacant expression at her cast. El decided to mirror Emma's actions, taking a spot on Gabby's other side and discreetly looking at the off-white cast covering Gabby's wrist.

Trish returned from the window and stood in front of the trio, leaning back against the wall and crossing her arms. No one had the words, nor did they know if speaking would even be a good idea. That is, until Gabby inhaled sharply and a small whimper escaped her throat.

"Hey," Trish said gently, stepping forward as tears brimmed in Gabby's eyes. "It's okay,"

El wasn't sure what to do but she could understand how Gabby was feeling. There had been so many instances both during her time in the lab and after escaping that she would be overcome by the pain of it all and the only thing that she seemed fit to do was cry. Even that didn't always help, though.

"It's not fair," Gabby said, her voice punctuated with shaky breaths. "I didn't do anything wrong!"

"I know, I know," Trish said, grabbing Gabby's hands and crouching down in front of her so she could look up and make eye contact. "He's a piece of shit,"

This brought about a sob from Gabby and Emma pulled her in tighter, resting her head on her shoulder. "Was your mom around?"

"Yeah, she was downstairs," Gabby sniffled. "But she never does anything about it. I was just trying to do my laundry - you know I'm supposed to get my chores and laundry and stuff done on the weekends - but I um, I didn't get to it until Sunday and I didn't remember until later in the day and that's when *he* needed his clothes washed for work today and my load was still going and he just got pissed," She paused to inhale, her eyes still glistening with tears. "And I don't know - I never know when he's gonna... Sometimes he's really nice, you know? H-He just got us tickets to see Cats and he and mom have been getting along... He still yells but he hasn't um, he -" Another surge of emotion overwhelmed her and a fresh onslaught of tears streamed down her cheeks.

"He can buy all the musical tickets he wants," Trish said bluntly. "He's still an asshole and you don't deserve it. You understand that, don't you, Gabby?"

Gabby pursed her lips, her ginger locks falling forward to shield her face like a veil.

"So we um," Gabby managed to continue, sniffing and taking a deep breath. "I was taking my stuff out of the washer to put it in the dryer and he grabbed my arm really hard and pushed me back," She said, her voice wavering. "He said I wasn't listening to him and that I didn't respect him but he just kept saying the same mean things over and over again and... and I guess I lost my balance or something because I fell and when I caught myself, that's when I broke my wrist,"

As El listened, memories of lab employees grabbing her, carrying her, and throwing her into isolation rooms flooded her mind. She tried to push aside the panic that filled her veins every time she thought of her time there. She was safe now. She wasn't in the lab. But Gabby was *currently* experiencing these things, being hurt, and that made her angry. As much as El wanted to keep her powers a secret still, she felt like her insides were on fire and she wanted nothing more than to break Gabby's *father's* wrist. At least.

She thought about what made her feel better when she felt scared or hurt. Mike's promises helped, as did Joyce telling her she was "safe". That word had such a powerful resonance to it.

Finding her voice, El patted Gabby on the knee. "We're here," She said solemnly, deliberately. "You're safe here,"

.....

Mike had been exhausted through the first three periods of the day. He'd finally managed to fall asleep a little after midnight but that hadn't left him enough time to get a good amount of sleep so he spent the morning trying not to nod off while Mr. Clarke talked about the different types of rock. Lunch had helped him to wake up, especially after meeting up with Dustin, Lucas, and Will whose outpouring of anxiety and reluctance over the dance at the girls' school was palpable. Dustin was especially nervous which, Mike considered, made sense if he had a crush on Gabby. He hadn't really noticed anything but El *did* have this otherworldly ability to sense things about people so he didn't doubt that it was true.

"*Something wicked this way comes'...*" Mike murmured, reading through his assigned reading for English. They'd moved on to Macbeth which was kind of cool but the way Shakespeare wrote a lot of his stuff made it difficult to understand sometimes so Mike found himself reading the same passages over and over again until his mind would start to wander.

With the dance being fresh on his mind, this is what he naturally gravitated toward. He'd never been to a school dance before and had always thought they were pretty cheesy, though that hadn't stopped him from wanting to go. Everyone at school always talked about how much fun they more or less decided that they were lame but that had been a thinly-veiled attempt at convincing themselves they didn't care that they didn't fit in at school.

But now he actually had a *date*. The idea was so weird to wrap his mind around, one that had begun to form on a November night in the cafeteria was now manifesting, though not as he had originally imagined it. The reality of it all made him more nervous. He'd need to wear suit which, thankfully, he had, but what else did he need? What were those flower things called that girls wore on their wrists? He should get one of those, probably. And what would they even *do* at the dance? There was no pretending that he had anything resembling dancing skills. He had a general idea of what to expect based on movies and stuff but even that was a bit nerve-wracking.

And this was going to be a Valentine's dance so even if they were all going as a group, there was definitely an emphasis on the romantic side of the night, even if El wasn't aware of it... but then again, with her new friends, how could he be sure what she was aware of or not? Maybe they filled her in on a lot of stuff that girls know or do or expect which would make him completely clueless and he could end up looking like a total wastoid...

A card. He'd get her a card. A Valentine's - wait, no... a *Valentine*. That would be something special and El probably didn't know what they were so it could be a nice thing for her. Mike pushed himself away from the D&D table where he'd been working on his homework and began furiously searching the basement. It'd been a long time since anyone had used it but he knew his mom had packed up the arts and crafts stuff somewhere down here.

.....

The girls spent most of the afternoon at Trish's house. Gabby eventually started to feel better and they'd spent some time watching MTV and commenting on whether they thought certain musicians were hot as well as the outfits of some of the women. El was able to deduce that 'hot' was sort of like 'pretty' except they always used the word to refer to the guys on the screen.

At one point, they'd gone down to the kitchen to get drinks and snacks. Everything in Trish's house felt old but really nice. The ceilings were high and all of the floors were made of wood with some of the rooms having large, ornate rugs covering much of the floorspace. The kitchen was large with an island in the center and a back door that led out to a large unfenced backyard and a thick patch of woods behind the house.

As Trish and the other girls entered the kitchen, they'd found Trish's mom slumped over the kitchen table on the opposite end of the room.

"She's fine," Trish said with casual disdain, following El's gaze that had warily settled on the older woman. "Probably just trashed, as usual,"

"Trashed?" El repeated, still watching the unmoving woman as the girls walked over to the fridge and Trish began to rifle through its contents.

"You know," Emma said, clarifying. "She kind of drinks a lot,"

"Pfft," Trish scoffed. "There's an understatement,"

El's brow furrowed as she processed this. Terry would sometimes slump over like that, never moving and seemingly unresponsive, but she didn't drink. 'Drinking', as they were using the word, seemed to mean with regards to alcohol. And if that was the case, how could alcohol make someone seem so... different. Becky 'drank' sometimes, but she said it was to relax and El never saw Becky go unconscious from it. Maybe something was wrong?

"Does she... need help?" El wondered aloud, contemplating going

over to the woman but trepidation kept her feet firmly planted on the other side of the room.

"She needs help but not the kind *we* could get her," Trish said with a roll of her eyes as she poured four glasses of iced tea on the counter. "Hey mom!" She called out sharply but the woman didn't stir. "*Mom!*" She moved slightly, murmuring and mumbling into the tabletop. "Yeah, she's out,"

El, still perturbed by the compromised state of Trish's mom, did her best to direct her focus elsewhere. Her friends didn't seem to think this was an unusual occurrence so El chose to go along with it as well.

"She's always like that," Trish could tell El was still a bit worried. "She hates her life so she drowns her sorrows in any bottle of vodka she can get her hands on. My dad seems to feel the same way except he just doesn't come home most nights," Trish shrugged. Her demeanor was like Teflon, as though nothing could stick to her but El wondered if she was actually as okay with the situation as she portrayed herself to be.

.....

Another quiet night at home. Becky helped Terry get to bed and then excused herself to her bedroom for the night, though she never went to sleep right away. El didn't have to go to bed when Terry did but by the time Becky came back out and got ready to actually go to sleep, that was when she generally expected El to hit the hay.

El liked the routine. She liked knowing what to expect. She'd grown up with some routines in the lab but the only ones that stood out were the ones she wished she could forget. The procedure for preparing her for the EKG, the bath, the somewhat regular bathing schedule when she'd shower in front of two female guards who never spoke to her but stayed nearby to make sure she didn't run off. She rarely got little more than a hand towel to dry herself off back then... Most things in the lab weren't expected, though. Some days she'd spend the whole day in her small cell of a room with no one to talk to and the only human interaction being the brief, wordless encounters with the guards who brought her bland, minimalistic meals. On her

busier days, she'd participate in experiments but the only thing she could predict about that was that over time, they seemed to expect more and more out of her.

But these routines at home felt nice. Predictable and comfortable like the reliable feeling of a warm blanket wrapped around your shoulders. She could tell both Becky and Terry cared about her, even if they had their own problems. She could rely on them to be there, to talk to her if she was feeling lonely, and she thought that if there ever came a time when it'd be necessary, they would protect her as well.

She snuck into her mom's room again that night, another of her favorite routines. She was getting used to meeting Terry in the darkness, eager to speak to her and learn from her everything she couldn't say outside of this place.

"Something's bothering you," Terry said, sensing her daughter's discomfort.

El paused, then reluctantly nodded. *"My friend..."* She said, hesitating. While Gabby hadn't asked her to keep what happened a secret, she could also imagine that she might not want other people to know what happened. But Terry didn't talk to anyone so that probably made it okay, right? *"She's hurt,"*

"Oh no..." Terry's voice in El's head was soft like velvet and warm like a summer breeze. *"Is she okay?"*

El made a gesture somewhat resembling a cross between a shaking of her head and a shrug of her shoulders. *"Her...dad..."* She said quietly. *"Hurt her,"*

"Oh..." Terry said softly, her face etched with empathetic concern. *"You're worried for her,"*

El gave a small nod, her gaze cast down as she kicked at the thin layer of water at her feet. A thought crossed her mind but before she could speak the words, even in her mind, Terry responded.

"You want to know about your father," She said knowingly. *"Your real*

one,"

El pursed her lips, listening but refusing to look up.

Terry sighed. *"We met on orientation day at the lab,"* She explained, her voice serene and contemplative. *"Before they put us through the really intense experiments, we had a full day of getting oriented to the places we'd be expected to come to, as well as a week or so of basic tests that provided information about our current mental states, cognitive abilities, and health. There were so many of us in those initial stages that sometimes we'd spend hours waiting in conference rooms until our turn was called,"*

Terry's eyes stared off into the distant blackness and El could tell she was reliving the memory, though she wasn't sharing it with her. *"We met at the coffee station. I had overfilled my cup and he stepped in to help clean up the mess I'd made,"* A soft smile traced her lips. *"He told me his name was Ben and he was hoping to get enough money out of the study to cover start-up costs for a business he wanted to open,"* El's brow furrowed at that as the gears began to turn in her own mind. *"He was a little bit older than me but he was very sweet and had the most charming smile... We started spending a lot of time together outside of the lab but when the experiments started getting more involved and the drugs got stronger, he dropped out. He said he'd earned enough money to get a loan from the bank for his restaurant... he wanted me to quit the study with him but I was still in so much debt with school..."* She trailed off before adding in a wistful tone, *"I should've followed him..."*

El's heart was pounding in her chest. She wasn't sure if she wanted to know or not but she impulsively asked, "Show me?"

Terry looked down at her daughter and smiled, then suddenly El was bombarded with a familiar image. She was in a grocery store, of all places, watching as her mom selected boxes of pasta noodles when a tall man came up behind her, wrapping her in a hug. El watched as her mother spun around, giggling as she looked up into the face of someone El knew and the realization made her chest feel tight, her heart shattering into a million pieces.

He was younger, thinner, and had more hair but it was him.

"Benny, what are you doing?" Her mother laughed in the memory and tears flooded El's eyes before the image vanished.

Back in the darkness, Terry looked at her daughter with concern as El's breathing quickened. Everything felt tight, spinning. Her heart hurt and her tears burned. It was him. The first person to have shown her kindness after she escaped the lab. She remembered the Benny she'd met - balding and burly but gentle and kind. He'd given her new food, things she'd never had before, and her first piece of clothing that wasn't a hospital gown. He'd tried to help her and he was gone. That woman had killed him and she'd never be able to see him again. Benny could have been her *dad*. Not like Gabby's abusive one, not like Trish's absent one or even Mike's clueless and distant one. And certainly nothing like her *Papa*. She couldn't even fathom the way things could've been different but she knew they would've been and that realization, that sorrow, made her feel like she'd had the wind knocked out of her.

.....

Flashback

The rooms at Hawkins National Laboratory felt colder and more sterile than the children's hospital had. Several of the corridors had been closed off and Hopper and Diane wondered what went on beyond the caution tape and security codes but chose not to ask about it. Their first and primary concern was Sarah and if this place could help, they didn't want to step on any toes. Besides, it was no secret that the HNL worked on other projects aside from children's cancer research. What those projects were didn't necessarily concern them, even if Diane still had her reservations about attempting another treatment rather than giving their daughter some comfort in her last months of life.

Sarah was lying in a hospital bed and dressed in a hospital gown just as she'd been back home. The same machines that monitored her breathing and heart were hooked up as well as an IV that connected to her new medicine. The unfamiliar pink liquid dripped steadily in its pouch by her bed.

"Is it gonna hurt?" Sarah asked plaintively, her eyes wide as her parents and doctor stood around her bed.

"We don't actually know, kiddo," Hopper admitted, crouching down so his face was next to hers. "It might be like the other medicine; you remember that, don't you?"

"It made me sick," Sarah nodded regretfully.

"Yeah," Hopper sighed. "I know. So it might be like that or it might be a little different but I tell you what," He said, his voice picking up pep to brighten his daughter's spirits. "If it doesn't work or we really, really don't like it, we'll stop," He offered, mentally crossing his fingers that this wouldn't be the case. He wanted desperately for this to save her. "How's that sound?"

Sarah pursed her lips in thought, glancing at the faces surrounding her before looking at her father and nodding. "Okay, Daddy," She said bravely. "I'll try,"

.

"Is this love or am I dreaming? This must be love 'cause it's really got a hold on me..."

29. Can't Fight This Feeling

Chapter 29: Can't Fight This Feeling (by REO Speedwagon)

"My life has been such a whirlwind since I saw you. I've been running around in circles in my mind. And it always seems that I'm following you, girl, 'cause you take me to the places that alone I'd never find..."

.....

He recognized this place. The fans that always seemed to be up and running because even in the dead of winter the heat from the grill made the place a sauna. The folksy old rock music that played over the speakers. The weathered yet charming old booth seats and the checkered curtains that covered the windows. He'd been here before with his family a few times in the past - coming home from family road trips and after sleepovers at Will's house. His own mom didn't really like for him to eat too much greasy fast food so they only came once in a while unless he was with friends.

The place seemed empty aside from a few older men he didn't recognize that were sitting and chatting amicably at one of the booths. The tall, bulky man he remembered as Benny came out in an apron and a grease-stained shirt, carrying a plate with a freshly prepared burger. He could almost smell the rich scent of the ground beef and melted cheese as Benny walked past him, never even batting an eye in his direction as he proceeded to talk sports with the other men.

As Benny turned to head back to the kitchen, Mike continued to walk around the familiar restaurant with an innate curiosity as to why he was here of all places. The sound of Benny yelling startled him from his thoughts.

"Hey!" The burly man yelled before running back to the kitchen. "Come here!"

Without thinking, Mike chased after Benny who was still apparently oblivious to his presence and as they rounded the corner and caught the apparent cause of Benny's outburst, Mike stopped short, blinking in surprise.

It was El in her hospital gown, just like he'd seen on the tapes from the lab. She was covered in dirt and small scratches, clutching a small basket of fries as though her life depended on it.

"El!" Mike called out as Benny grabbed her from behind and spun her around to face him. "Hey, stop!" Mike ran up to Benny and pulled on his arms in vain in an attempt to free El from his hold. "Leave her alone!"

"You think you can steal from me, boy?" Benny thundered angrily as El looked up in terror at the towering man.

"Let her go!" Mike continued to push and pull at Benny but it was as though he was a ghost and Benny didn't react at all.

A pause fell over El and Benny as she looked at him with apprehension and fear, her breathing quick and uneven, and his face changed as he took in her appearance, registering that this didn't seem to be the typical kid taking a shot at a free snack.

"What in the hell?" Benny murmured and Mike relaxed his futile attempts at separating the two, watching the encounter. "Okay uh," He said, still holding El's arms in place. "Okay, you're hungry?"

El looked around, her eyes wide like a frightened animal as she gradually ceased her panting.

"Okay," Benny said, letting her arms go and standing up straight. "Damn," He murmured under his breath, taking a second glance at her as he clasped a hand over his face, pulling it down as he thought. "Okay, I've got people out there in the diner. I'll make 'em leave and I'll get you some real food, alright? Just-just stay here," He ordered and El seemed to freeze in place, only moving to turn her head and watch Benny walk back out.

"El?" Mike said once they were alone, staring at her and approaching her with trepidation. She seemed so feral and unpredictable in this situation, like the night in which they'd found her but more scared and more worse for wear. "Are you okay?"

El didn't respond, however. She barely moved except to tentatively lift the remaining fries from the basket to her mouth. Most had spilled out from her encounter with Benny so she was left with mostly the tiny crispy pieces

and only a handful at that. Mike's heart ached as he watched her greedily stuff them into her mouth, the disappointment evident on her face as she finished the last fry and proceeded to lick the salt and crumbs from the paper that lined the basket.

"Jeez, El," Mike said softly as he watched El's eyes dart back in the direction Benny had gone and he could almost see the gears turning in her head before she dropped the basket in her hand and started walking in that direction.

As they passed the kitchen area, El walked slowly and stealthily, as if her life depended on being silent and undetectable. She glanced through the window on the kitchen door to see Benny toss a hunk of meat onto the grill, sizzling as it made contact.

Seemingly satisfied with what he was doing, El walked out the other door leading to the dining area with Mike following closely behind and studying her movements intently.

He watched as she took slow, careful steps around the tables and booths, touching and looking at them as though she'd never seen anything like them before. The way that she looked at such ordinary objects with wonder and fascination was both intriguing and disturbing. They spent a few minutes walking around the now empty diner with El never noticing or acknowledging his presence before Benny came out with a burger for El.

"Here," He said, gesturing with his head walking over to a table and setting the new basket down. "Come on over,"

El cautiously approached the table and at Benny's coaxing, took the seat opposite her.

"Go 'head," He nodded to the basket, pushing it closer to her. "You like burgers, don't ya?"

El looked down at the basket curiously, then back up to Benny one last time before snatching the burger up and tearing into it ravenously.

Mike sat down at the next table, leaning one arm on the back of the chair as he faced them.

"Jeez," Benny said, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed,

looking at El with concern. "Your parents forget to feed you?" He asked but El didn't seem to care; she barely seemed to stop to chew. Mike had never seen a girl eat like that before. Even for El, who he knew to have a voracious appetite, this was kind of weird. "Is that why you ran away?" El finally slowed down a bit but her focus remained fixed on the food in her hands. "They, uh..." Benny continued. "They hurt you?"

Mike's heart felt like it was sinking as he thought about the context of what was going on. She must have just escaped the lab. The mention of her 'parents' making his muscles clench with anger as he thought about Dr. Brenner and the way he'd treated El.

"You went to the hospital, you got scared, you ran off, you wound up here, is that it?" Benny went on as El ignored him, only pausing once to look up at him. "Alright," Benny said, gently taking the burger from her hands as she watched. "I'll give this back, alright? And you can have as much as you want. Alright? Maybe even some ice cream, but you gotta answer a few of my questions first, alright?" He paused but El only stared up at him. "We got a deal?" Taking her silence for agreement, Benny went on, "Alright, let's start with the easy stuff," He held a hand out to her. "My name's Benny. Benny Hammond," When El didn't move, he took her right hand and placed it in his outstretched hand. "See? Like this. Here, I got you. Don't worry, it's okay," El watched him warily as he shook her hand up and down. "Nice to meet you, yeah. And you are?" Again, she was silent, casting her gaze back down to the table.

As Benny sighed thoughtfully, he flipped El's wrist over, revealing her tattoo. El quickly retracted her arm defensively and Benny sighed again. It was getting difficult for Mike to watch the interaction, just knowing how hard things had once been for El.

"Eleven?" Benny said. "What's that mean?" El's silence was beginning to drain him. "What's it mean?"

"No," She murmured in a soft but firm tone, looking down, forlorn.

"Well, I'll be damned," Benny remarked. "She speaks. 'No'? 'No', what?" He waited a beat for her to respond but when she didn't, he clicked his tongue. "Alright, I guess no more food, then," He said, gathering up her basket and moving to stand.

"Eleven," El said, her eyes following the basket.

"Yeah," Benny paused. "What's it mean?"

Mike watched with interest, remembering the way she'd paused when she'd introduced herself to him, though it hadn't been nearly as difficult to communicate with her as it seemed to be for Benny.

"Eleven," El pointed to herself and Benny looked down at her sympathetically.

"Alright then," He said, setting the basket back down and pushing it over to her. "Here you go," Benny chuckled and without a moment's hesitation, she snatched the burger back up and began digging into it once more. "Take it easy, take it easy,"

Mike watched as Benny sighed and stood up, walking back to the back. He then took the seat in which Benny had just sat, opposite El.

"Can you hear me, El?" Mike asked as El tore into the last bits of her burger and then moved on to the extra fries in the basket. The sight was enough to give him a stomachache. "El?" She clearly couldn't hear him. Whatever was going on, he was clearly a spectator in it and it wasn't the first time he'd had a dream in which no one seemed to know he was there. Sighing, Mike stood up and followed in the direction Benny had gone, finding him on the phone.

"Yeah, look, all I know is that she's scared to death," Benny said, his back turned to Mike. "Yeah, I think maybe she's been abused or...kidnapped or somethin'," Mike couldn't help but scoff at how much of an understatement that had been. "Yeah, it'd be great if someone would come by,"

Mike walked back out into the dining area as Benny gave the person on the phone the address to the restaurant. Why was he here right now? As he pondered, he started to piece together the timeline, realizing this was a dream and recalling that news of Benny's apparent suicide had started circulating around the time they'd found El. He looked back at Benny with apprehension, wondering what had happened leading up to that if he was here with El now. What did this dream mean? Was El telling him something?

Mike smirked to himself as he came out into the dining area to find El stopping the fan with her mind. She polished off the rest of her fries and sat back in her seat, more content and calm than he'd seen her since being in the restaurant.

The room started to become distorted and Mike heard Benny call El back to the back. As everything shifted in wavy shades of grey and black, Mike found himself in the kitchen with Benny and El. He'd been talking to her about his restaurant and the people that came in, the food he liked to make while subtly trying to coax more information out of her, though she remained steadily quiet and selective in her responses.

As El sat on a table, clad in a giant new 'Benny's Restaurant' T-shirt and eating strawberry ice cream straight from the carton with a large spoon, Benny washed dishes in the sink opposite her, turning around periodically to look at her.

"You like that ice cream, huh?" Benny said amicably as he finished with the dishes and a glimmer of a smile traced El's lips. "Smile looks good on you," El's faced quickly returned to its expressionless norm. "You know, smile?" Benny said, offering her a cheerful grin of his own that easily elicited another small smile from her.

A knocking from the front of the restaurant caught both of their attention, as well as Mike's, and El's content and pleasant expression returned to one of wariness as she looked to Benny.

"Alright," Benny said reassuringly. "You just sit tight. Whoever it is, I'll tell 'em to go away real quick, alright?" He wiped his hands on a dish towel and tossed it aside before heading out to the front door.

El watched him go and kept her eyes on him as he reappeared through the open sections of the wall in the kitchen. Mike moved closer to El so that he could see what she was seeing, peering through the kitchen and through the cut-out window-like sections in the wall that gave them clear view of the front door and much of the dining area.

Benny was talking to someone at the front door but they couldn't hear the exchange very well until he turned around, allowing a blonde woman to enter the restaurant. Mike noticed El's muscles visibly clenching even though the dim lighting in the dining area made it difficult to see the

woman's face.

"Sorry again for trying to turn you away there," Benny said as he led her inside. "You know, it's funny -"

El's breathing was becoming quicker and her eyes widened like a deer caught in headlights as a woman Mike was beginning to recognize came farther into the dining room.

"Your uh, voice sounds different on the -"

Both Mike and El gasped as the blonde woman lifted a gun from her purse and Mike finally remembered who she was. The same woman he'd seen the night they found the Demogorgon at school. She was with the lab!

She pulled the trigger, causing El to jump as a bullet sunk into Benny's skull and Mike thought he might puke.

El gasped as Benny's body hit the floor and she scrambled off the table, knocking over a dish in the process before darting through to the back of the restaurant where she'd initially entered.

"El, wait!" Mike clambered after her, trying to keep up but stopping short when the two found a gun pointed at their faces. Despite knowing it was a dream, Mike's heart was pounding in his chest, his adrenaline pumping madly as another man stepped up beside the first, pointing another gun at them.

Panting, Mike looked back but he could hear voices in the dining room now and knew they were being surrounded. A gut-wrenching crunch sound pulled his attention back to the two men before them, just in time to see them fall lifelessly to the floor in front of them. Mike's eyes widened at the men lying in heaps as El darted one last glance behind her, still never seeing him, then bolted out into the dark night. Mike could hear footsteps coming from the opposite direction and he quickly followed El's trail.

Thunder cracked above them as they dashed through the woods, branches and leaves crunching beneath their feet as Mike did his best to ensure he didn't trip or fall, lest he lose El. She never looked back but he could hear her panting, the faint whimpers in her throat as she pushed through the brush and winced in her bare feet. Finally looking back and realizing no

one was behind her, El slowed her pace, her breathing haggard as rain began to pour heavily. Despite the cover of the treetops, they were soaked in seconds and though her face was wet from the rain, Mike could tell she was crying.

Unable to say or do anything that would make a difference, Mike followed El through the woods as she walked at a slower pace, whimpering and limping from the cuts in her feet as the rain beat down on them relentlessly. He could hear her shivering and felt a pang in his chest knowing that even if he tried to give her his jacket, not only was it also soaked, but she wouldn't be able to take it anyway. Now she looked the way he remembered her from that night - cold, lost, drenched, and terrified. He'd already developed a better understanding of her since learning of her past with the lab but seeing the events that had unfolded just before he'd met her put things in a new perspective and he felt a strong sense of empathy and righteous anger on her behalf.

Suddenly, he heard her voice, but she wasn't looking at him. He saw flashlights up ahead and deduced that that must have been him and his friends beginning their search through the woods for Will. They were still far away, though.

"Mike?" Mike looked to El but her lips weren't moving and she wasn't looking at him. "Mike?"

The woods around him began to fade away and he looked around in confusion.

"Mike?" Mike's supercom crackled from his bedside and he sat up, panting in the dark. Soft light from the streetlights outside illuminated the device and Mike clasped it in his hand, more awake than he usually was when he first woke up.

"El, is that you?" He asked dumbly, knowing that she was the only girl that communicated with him through the supercom.

"Yes," She said in a whimper and Mike's heart sank.

"What's wrong?" He asked, his own breathing steadily returning to normal as he sat up. "Are-you okay?"

A soft sob came through the supercom and Mike wished she wasn't so far away. "Bad dream," She said pitifully and Mike's eyes widened with interest.

"Y-Yeah?" He stammered. "What about?"

El inhaled deeply. "Benny,"

"Wow," Mike blinked, turning on his bedside light. "Um... El?" He paused, knowing that she was listening even if she didn't fill the gap in the silence. "I-I think I had the same dream,"

"Really?" El asked quietly. "I... didn't try,"

"You didn't?" Mike asked, dumbfounded. "That's so weird... Um... wow," Little cries continued to come from El and Mike listened, quietly empathetic for a moment before asking, "Was um, was it real, El? What happened in the dream? Was it like, a memory or something?"

"Y-Yes," El replied, sniffing.

"Jeez," Mike said, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "I uh... I'm really sorry, El,"

Whimpers and soft cries were her only response and Mike fidgeted with the tag on his comforter as he waited for her to say something else, or to come up with something to say himself. When she didn't, he sat quietly with her, periodically letting her know he was still there by making random, inconsequential comments about different objects in his room until she finally seemed to calm down.

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The weeks leading up to the dance quickly came and went. El had bought a brand new dress the weekend prior with Nancy and Becky had helped her with her hair on the night of the dance. Amidst the excitement of preparing for the dance, El's mind was kept somewhat weighed down by the realizations and insights she'd been developing over the past few weeks. She now had a friend who was being treated poorly and for whom she desperately wanted to get vengeance but rationality and logic told her she could just blatantly use her powers

around them, even if she was beginning to trust them. She was in hiding and the wrong person seeing her could put everything in jeopardy. But what could she do?

Then there was Trish and her family. "Drinking" was apparently a problem? El knew Hopper drank a lot and Becky seemed to drink a good amount of the time as well. Becky said it helped her to relax after a stressful day. El had never seen anyone look the way Trish's mom did, though. So was drinking actually bad? Should she be worried? She wasn't sure. She needed to know more.

And then Benny. The initial blow of finding out that the first person she'd met after escaping the lab had actually been her true father had steadily subsided but every time she thought about it, it still made her breath catch in her throat. So she tried not to think about it. She'd spent years of her life in the lab wondering what if? What if I run? What if I find somewhere to hide? What if I kill this guard? What if they catch me before I escape?

Sure, she'd eventually made it out but it'd taken the distraction of opening an inter-dimensional portal and unleashing a dangerous monster for her to be able to get out without getting caught. And that hadn't exactly been one of her ideas - it'd just happened.

'What if's hurt, though. They felt like tastes of freedom when all she could see were the dark, black walls of an isolation room. They felt like her lungs burning for air and her heart crying for love and compassion that never came. The gentle, fleeting touch of her Papa when she'd done something terrible... but that he had wanted her to do. She didn't want to go back to a world of 'what if's but they plagued her like vermin, biting at her ankles and leaving nasty scars that made it difficult to walk, difficult to keep going.

So she focused on the dance. She focused on Mike and being excited and as her aunt had pulled and pushed her pixie hair into a style, she'd thought about his freckles and his smile. These things always lifted some of the weight from her heart.

Gabby had come over to get ready with her since she lived so close and it was an excuse to be out of the house and away from her father. Emma's older sister Nadine, who was about the same age as Nancy,

had just gotten her license and was driving Trish and Emma while Jonathan was on his way up from Hawkins with Will, Dustin, Lucas, and Mike in tow.

"You look so pretty, El," Gabby smiled at her friend, her auburn locks curled into loose ringlets over her shoulders.

El smiled, the warmth of those words lifting her out of her thoughts. "You look pretty," She parroted, returning the compliment to Gabby and when the freckle-faced girl beamed, El's smile widened as well.

A knock at the door downstairs caught both girls attention and Gabby giggled, looking to El and wiggling her eyebrows. El didn't understand the facial expression but she at least understood that Gabby was excited and so was she.

"Girls!" Becky called from downstairs. "Jonathan and the boys are here!"

"Go strut your stuff, El," Gabby said, pushing El out of the bathroom and turning the light off in her wake.

The boys stood downstairs in the living room, shuffling about awkwardly and nervously but none more than Mike who held a small box with a ribbon tied in a bow around it. They were all dressed in suits and dress clothes that hadn't seen the light of day since Will's fake funeral, at least. As El and Gabby made their way down the hall and into the living room, Dustin was the first to notice them.

Mike had been looking down, trying to unfurl the hem of his dress pants by kicking his foot when Dustin nudged him and he looked up.

The first thing he noticed was the way her deep purple dress made her skin seem to glow against it. She was wearing an open white sweater over it to shield her arms from the cold and a pair of nude flats. Her short hair was spikey in some places and relaxed in others, giving her an ethereal appearance that reminded him of a fairy. A short bang was parted to the side that seemed to accentuate her face perfectly and it took a moment for Mike to realize that he hadn't said anything and his mouth had gone dry.

"Nice, man," Dustin chortled as Mike came back to his senses, then looked to Gabby. "I uh, didn't know you were gonna be here,"

Gabby shrugged, smiling. "I live close by,"

"You think your brother can fit us all in his car?" Lucas asked Will.

"Maybe," Will said uncertainly.

"Uh," Mike stumbled over his words, nervous to begin with but keenly aware of the way their friends were watching his every move. "Here," He shoved the box toward El. "This is for you,"

El quirked her head in confusion and before she could move, he was already opening it for her.

"Um, here," Mike mumbled, pulling out a fresh pink corsage and discarding the box on an end table.

"Oh, it's so beautiful!" Gabby exclaimed excitedly and Mike's cheeks flushed. El smiled at her friend before looking back at Mike.

"Girls uh," Mike tried to press on. "At least, I think, I don't actually know 'cause I've never been to a dance so I wasn't sure and then Nancy told me -"

"Dude, come on," Dustin said impatiently, then turned to El. "It's called a corsage. You wear it on your wrist,"

El registered this information, offering her wrist to a nervous Mike who managed to clumsily slide the corsage over her hand. He exhaled, smiling as El looked down at the flower on her wrist in amazement.

"Pretty," She said softly, delicately touching the petals.

"Yes, very pretty" Lucas said abruptly. "Can we go now or are we just gonna stand around and watch Mike be awkward?"

"*Shut up, Lucas!*" Mike snapped.

"Alright, that's enough," Dustin stepped in before his two friends

could get into an argument. "Let's just go,"

The drive to Clarksville Middle School was relatively brief. They'd managed to squeeze into the car by having Lucas sit up front while Gabby, Will, Mike, and El sat in the backseat and Dustin sat crouched in the back trunk area behind the backseat.

"Are you okay back there?" Jonathan called back to Dustin who was getting himself situated and crossed his arms over the backseat between Will and Mike's heads.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Dustin quipped. "Just don't kill me,"

"Sure," Jonathan chuckled half-heartedly as he pulled off.

"Oh my god," Gabby exclaimed, leaning forward so Jonathan could hear her. "Can you turn the radio up?"

"Sure," He agreed, adjusting the volume as Gabby sat back happily.

"I love this song!" She declared as Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody filled the car.

"You're into Queen, huh?" Jonathan remarked, impressed. "That's pretty cool,"

"Ahh, this is my favorite part!" Gabby cried as the operatic part began with a steady piano staccato. "*I see a little silhouetto of a man. Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do the Fandango?*" She sang along dramatically as Mike and Lucas blinked in surprise. El was used to Gabby singing along to everything so she didn't think much of it while Dustin watched her with an intrigued smirk. Will wasn't paying much attention and was just trying to avoid being jostled as he wasn't feeling his best today. Nothing significant had happened since his last almost-vomit in the bathroom but he'd just been feeling 'off' today. He hadn't wanted to alarm anyone, though, so he'd gone along with the plan without telling anyone. But as they made their way to the school, he tried to will away the dull pain in his abdomen and the weird, fluttery feeling that would come and go periodically.

"*Galileo!*" Gabby continued to sing along, alternating between higher and lower voices in a playful way, clearly at home in her own

eccentric company. "*Galileo!*"

Much to her, and everyone else's surprise, however, Dustin jumped in at the next part.

"*I'm just a poor boy, nobody loves me,*" He sang with his slight lisp and Mike, Lucas, and El all turned their heads to him in surprise.

Gabby beamed at the sudden accompaniment, though never missing a beat. "*He's just a poor boy from a poor family!*"

"*Spare him his life from this monstrosity!*" They goofily sang together before erupting into laughter.

Lucas, turning around in the front seat, said to Mike, "What the hell is happening back there?"

Mike made an exaggerated gesture of confusion and El giggled before noticing the way Will was being even more quiet than usual.

"Will," She said, leaning forward and getting his attention. "You okay?"

"Huh?" Will startled, looking up at her and registering the way the others turned to look at him as well. Ever since he'd come back from the Upside Down, and especially after his friends found out about the whole vomiting-slugs-and-slipping-into-the-Upside-Down thing, everyone seemed to become hyper vigilant if the question of him being 'okay' came up.

"Yeah, I'm fine," He replied, changing his demeanor to one more relaxed and nonchalant despite the pain in his stomach and the mildly dizzy sensation in his head. "Just uh, I'm just wondering what the dance is gonna be like,"

This worked well to change the subject and the kids spent the remainder of the ride speculating and talking about what they thought would be at or happen at the dance.

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The gymnasium at Clarksville Middle was decorated with a myriad of

red, pink, and white balloons that hung from the walls in large clusters, along with paper hearts that were taped to the walls and dangled over doorways. There was a DJ up on a stage that overlooked the room and the back wall was lined with rectangular tables of snacks and drinks. There were several round tables lined up along the sides for students to eat or otherwise take breaks from dancing.

The group had linked up with Trish and Emma soon after arriving and Jonathan had said he was going to run through a drive-thru but would otherwise be waiting in the parking lot until the dance was over. Truth be told, he hadn't had a decent reason to turn down his brother's request for a ride up to Clarksville. Hawkins High was having their own Valentine's dance tonight and his developing feelings toward Nancy, coupled with the knowledge she would be going with Steve, made him eager to busy himself tonight. Even if that meant being chauffeur to his little brother and friends for the night. He could get homework done in the car, maybe step out for a while to take pictures. It was at least *something* to do that didn't involve hanging out in his room and wondering what Steve and Nancy were doing. What she was *letting* him do...

"Go talk to him!" Trish nudged Emma as they sat at one of the round tables. They'd already been at the dance for close to an hour and no one had gathered the courage to dance yet, except for Gabby who had dragged Trish out for a fast-paced Madonna song almost immediately.

"You still haven't talked to Josh yet?" Gabby inquired, sitting on Emma's opposite side. "You should go ask him to dance,"

"Uh, I don't know..." Emma said nervously, letting her gaze drift to the other side of the gym where a boy with moppy blonde hair stood talking and laughing with a group of other guys.

Meanwhile, Mike was trying to pay attention to the Lord of the Rings debate Lucas and Dustin were engaged in but he was much more focused on wondering whether now would be a good time to hold El's hand. She was sitting right next to him and his friends couldn't see anything from their vantage points around the table. Even Will seemed engaged in the nuances of Lucas and Dustin's conversation.

While El's attention was periodically bouncing back and forth between her girl friends and her guy friends, the girls were obviously caught up in their own world. If Mike just grabbed her hand under the table, maybe, it could be completely subtle and no one would even have to see. He'd had enough goading from his friends. Couldn't he just do something nice without having his friends tease him for it? Not that it *really* mattered - he knew they didn't mean anything by it. But it was still embarrassing.

Mike's palms felt sweaty and he anxiously rubbed them on his pants. He couldn't hold El's hands if he was all gross. He mentally chastised himself for being so nervous, finally emboldening himself enough to try and reach for her hand but he hadn't looked at what he was doing and he banged his hand on the table leg, causing it to jolt and startle everyone.

"What the hell?" Trish remarked.

"Whoops," Mike chuckled uncomfortably. "Sorry, guys,"

The boys smirked at him but after a few seconds, both groups returned to their original conversations.

Mike was mentally berating himself for being an idiot when he felt a gentle hand slip into his and he turned to El who was smiling softly at him. He returned her expression with a sheepish grin of his own.

Meanwhile, Will was trying his best to act and feel normal but the strange feeling he'd been having in the car had only increased. He could feel beads of sweat forming at his brow and he felt light-headed but he pushed on, fighting against whatever was making him feel ill. His stomach hurt a bit but he didn't feel nauseated so he wasn't particularly worried about throwing up. He just felt *off*.

As the upbeat melody of Kool and the Gang's 'Celebration' faded from the speakers and another slower song emerged, Mike finally rallied the courage he needed.

"D-Do you um," He said quietly to El. "Do you want to dance... with me?"

El's soft smile was soothing and her nod was elating.

"G-Great!" Mike exclaimed happily. "Okay..." He stood up and El followed closely behind as Dustin, Trish, and Gabby called out good-natured teasing remarks.

He had no idea what he was doing but he'd seen enough TV to have a vague idea. Relief came in knowing that El was just as clueless, if not more so, than he was.

"Okay uh," Mike stumbled over his words, avoiding eye contact because he knew it would make his face turn cherry red. "So I haven't actually done this before but I think you um, you put your arms up here," He grabbed her hands, putting them behind his neck. "A-And I put my hands here," He swallowed, the rapid pounding of his heart and the tension in his stomach unbeknownst to El. "And we just kind of move back and forth, like this," He said as they began to sway with the music, slightly off-beat at first but eventually settling into rhythm.

El had a strange but pleasant fluttery feeling in her belly and she couldn't help but smile when she looked at Mike. She could tell he was nervous but she wasn't sure why. This seemed like a nice thing to be doing. Why was he so scared? She caught his eyes at one point and he finally grinned bashfully, relaxing a little bit.

"H-Happy Valentine's Day, El," Mike squeaked.

"What is Valentine's Day?" El inquired. After all this talk leading up to the dance, she'd meant to ask but kept forgetting.

"Oh, uh," Mike paused, stammering. "I-It's a holiday, um, a day when you celebrate... uh... people you like,"

"Friends?"

"No, uh, well I mean, yes," Mike continued to stumble over his words. "You *can*, but it's usually um... do you remember when I told you about the Snowball?" El nodded. "Well uh, it's kind of like that? I guess? Um... like, it's people you like as... *more* than a friend, I guess... people you would take to a dance,"

"A crush?" El began to put the different pieces of information she'd learned together.

"Wh-What?" Mike's voice cracked. "Uh, um, yeah, you can do that..."

El nodded thoughtfully. If you took someone to a dance like the Snowball, or this Valentine's Day one, who was more than a friend and someone who was more than a friend was a 'crush', then did that mean Mike crushed her? Is that what the mouth-to-mouth in the cafeteria at his school had meant? Maybe a 'crush' meant that you 'crush' the person you like on the lips, like he'd done to her. She had just begun to contemplate the idea of crushing him on the lips when out of the corner of her eye she noticed something fall on the other side of the room and amidst the commotion, they heard someone yell "*Will!*"

Mike spun his head around and the two immediately recognized their friend on the gymnasium floor, unconscious and surrounded by their other friends as well as a growing crowd of people. Mike and El ran over just as a circle was forming around Will.

"What happened?!" A teacher scrambled to the floor beside Will to check him out.

"I dunno!" Dustin exclaimed, clutching his curly brown locks anxiously. "He was saying he didn't feel good and then he just collapsed!"

"He said his stomach hurt," Lucas added as the teacher checked Will's breathing and felt his forehead.

"He's burning up," She said, looking around the crowd for another adult. "Somebody go call 9-1-1!"

Paramedics were at the school within minutes of being called and Lucas and Dustin had run outside to get Jonathan who was now arguing with a paramedic to let him get closer to his brother.

Suddenly, seeing Will sprawled on the floor like that, El was struck with a familiar image in her head. She was in the Upside Down, kneeling beside a tree in the woods with Will. She'd gotten an

ominous feeling from him shortly after he'd found her, some harbinger that she couldn't quite put her finger on but she knew something terrible was going to happen.

"Not safe," She'd said and his expression had changed to visible discomfort.

"What do you mean?" He'd asked, looking around as though looking for some impending threat.

El slowly and shakily lifted her arm, pointing to him and poking her finger into his gut. "Not safe," She'd repeated and Will blanched.

"I-I don't understand," He'd stammered, following her finger to his stomach. "Me? I'm not safe?"

She was growing tired and it took all the energy she could muster to give a small nod in response. "Demogorgon,"

El gasped when she finally remembered. She took a couple steps back, her eyes widening with fear and disbelief as the paramedics loaded Will onto a stretcher. Her blood felt like it'd turned to ice as she realized what was happening to Will.

.....

"I can't fight this feeling anymore. I've forgotten what I started fighting for..."

.....

[A/N: Hey everyone! This will likely be my last chapter of spring break so I hope you enjoyed it! Please let me know what you think and what you think will happen! I'm going to be pretty busy over the next few weeks but if I get enough feedback from you guys, it might help motivate me to get the next chapter out sooner. As always, thank you for reading! Hope you liked it. :) Ta-ta for now!]

30. Don't Fear The Reaper

[A/N: Hey all! Thank you so much for your kind reviews. You guys seriously make my day and warm my heart. Also, thanks to Lucy for pointing out a minor continuity error in the last chapter - I totally hadn't even noticed so gracias!]

This is a nice long chapter so I hope you enjoy it! Only two more weeks left in the semester and then I'll be able to update even more frequently!]

Chapter 30: Don't Fear The Reaper (by Blue Oyster Cult)

"All our times have come here but now they're gone. Seasons don't fear the reaper, nor do the wind, the sun or the rain. We can be like they are..."

.....

Hopper had become an expert at weaving himself in and around the requirements of his day job and his debt to the lab. The fact that El was at a dance in Clarksville tonight as opposed to coming down to Hawkins for her usual Friday night made it even easier to coordinate things when the lab called him in unexpectedly.

He could tell they weren't telling him everything. Over the past few weeks, conversations had become more hushed and while they did a good job at appearing inconspicuous around him, he did a better job of spotting shady behavior when he saw it. He hadn't been a lead detective in Indianapolis because of his pretty face, after all.

An entire unit had been closed off and marked 'Authorized Personnel Only'. For what reason, he wasn't sure, but judging by how much attention everyone had been paying to those freakish yellow pods in the Upside Down, Hopper speculated the two could be related. Perhaps they were conducting tests back there and if that was the case, what *were* they finding out about those things? Ever since security had beefed up, he hadn't had any actual contact with them anymore. Now his expeditions largely kept him working as a glorified look-out and tour guide, escorting feeble old scientists and their apprentices through the harrowing climate of the Upside Down so

they could conduct their research.

They didn't mention Eleven as much as they used to, either. Perhaps that could be due to the increased attention being put into these pods but Hopper still kept that thread of suspicion alive and alert. Not that they *never* mentioned her or that he wasn't expected to keep searching for her while he was out in the Upside Down - the frequency at which they pushed the topic had just simmered down. Were they beginning to realize that she was no longer trapped in that dismal hell-hole? How long would it be before they realized she'd escaped? That Hopper had had a role in it?

It was relatively early in the night but Hopper had done his due diligence for this shift. After shucking off the heavy protective gear used during yet another trip into the Upside Down, Hopper was finally making his way through the halls of Hawkins lab to head out. With it being a Friday, most of the employees were off or home already, leaving only a smattering of agents and scientists around the fortress of a building.

As Hopper rounded a corner, he came face to face with that sign again. 'Authorized Personnel Only'. Curious, he looked up and down the hall to check and see if anyone was coming, then walked up to the metal doors, peering in through the small windows. All he could see was hallway and the main lights were off. Dim light stretched across the hall from under a door, however, and Hopper wondered what it was that they were keeping back there. What had they discovered?

There was a security card machine by the door, much like they used for each major section of the building. Without thinking it would actually work, Hopper held his own access card up to the machine and to his surprise, the light turned green and he heard the sound of the lock turning in the door. Another glance up and down the hall and Hopper quickly slipped through the door, holding it as it closed so it wouldn't make a sound.

The hall was silent and dimly lit as Hopper made his way to the only room with light coming from it. The heavy metal door was locked but peering through the window, Hopper could see that no one was inside. The overhead lights in the room were off but he quickly saw

that the light he'd seen peeping from under the door had come from a large illuminated 50 gallon fish tank. Inside, a creature unlike anything he'd ever seen was swimming with barely enough space to turn around. It looked to be almost a foot long and was grey and scaled, resembling a tadpole with legs that were beginning to grow. Its head opened and closed like the petals of a flower and rows of tiny sharp teeth were visible every time.

Before Hopper could stare any longer, the distant sound of footsteps and the murmuring of a conversation echoed from down the hall. He quickly darted into the next open room, hiding behind the door under the cover of dark as Dr. Brenner and one of the lead researchers, an older man named Richard, passed by.

"*Holy shit,*" Hopper mouthed to himself, having been under the impression that Brenner had died that night back in November when the Demogorgon came to the school. That had been what the kids had told him at least and he had yet to see or hear anyone mention Brenner up until this point. Knowing he was back, or rather, had never been gone, was a revelation in and of itself.

Hopper watched as the two stood outside the room with the monster, peering in thoughtfully as they discussed.

"As you can see, once passing through the initial larval stage, their development speeds up considerably," Richard said as Dr. Brenner looked through the window at the creature swimming around in its tank. "Judging by the protrusion of the limbs, we anticipate a transition from a wholly aquatic tank to a semi-aquatic or even fully terrestrial one,"

"Would you say it is the same species?" Brenner asked, still staring into the room.

"Without being able to conduct studies on the original creature, I'm afraid it would only be speculation at this point," Richard said regretfully. "Though, based on what I've been told of the other creature, I suspect this and the others are the offspring of that one,"

"What's your working theory?" Dr. Brenner inquired, finally stepping back from the door and looking down at the man.

"Well," Richard said, adjusting his glasses and looking over his clipboard. "As you know, we have several in varying stages of development consistent with amphibious species. We've harvested one of the pods from our field expedition and have been monitoring it in-house. It appears that these pods serve as nests or incubators for the larvae until they reach a certain stage at which point they emerge and continue to grow to the level you see in that specimen there," Richard gestured to the window. "Interestingly, in the most under-developed pods we've been able to study, it appears that they start out with hundreds of smaller larvae that then fight with one another for resources until only one remains. At that point, the larva is free to grow to the limits of the pod before making its way out," He glanced inside the room at the creature. "We've designed this tank to replicate conditions in the pod so as to simulate its natural habitat while allowing for better study and access. The pods themselves are mostly comprised of water and the light on the tank is meant to imitate the natural light emitted from the pods. Also, in their lesser developed stages, the larvae are coated with a thick layer of protective mucus that we believe guards against the relative acidity of the pods,"

"Incredible," Brenner breathed, staring in wonder at the creature through the window. "We'll need to continue monitoring this one, especially as it transitions. I want a full, detailed report on my desk Monday, can you do that?"

"Of course, Dr. Brenner, sir," Richard nodded.

"We need to be prepared as it grows," Brenner said thoughtfully.

Hopper pulled back, away from the doorway as he took in the information he'd just overhead. "Shit..."

.....

Despite desperately wanting to ride in the ambulance with his little brother, Jonathan and the kids piled into his car, following closely behind the emergency vehicle all the way to Clarksville General Hospital. Gabby decided to stay and ride along with Trish and Emma later since they had to wait for Emma's sister to come back to the dance and pick them up.

The drive to the hospital was a blur of flashing red and white lights in front of them, and the screaming siren, the anxious energy of everyone in the car. El tried to tell Mike about what was happening to Will but each time she did, her mouth went dry and her words died in her throat. Finally as Will was taken down to the ambulance bay and Jonathan pulled into the parking lot, El found her words.

"Mike," She said, clutching his jacket to get his attention. "Will..."

"Yeah?" Mike said impatiently as Jonathan stopped the car. "What about Will?"

"He's..." El hesitated, her eyes wide with fear as she looked up at the building. "He's got monsters," She pointed to her stomach. "In here,"

"*What?*" Mike asked, confounded.

"Little monsters," El repeated as everyone was quickly exiting the car.

"Come on guys," Jonathan said, his patience wearing thin. "Get out of the car,"

Mike and El quickly unbuckled and hopped out, then the group ran for the emergency room entrance.

.....

The emergency room was packed to capacity with every seat filled and some people milling about with their loved ones as they waited. Jonathan was escorted to the back right away to meet Will and the ambulance whereas the boys and El were left to wait anxiously in the crowded room.

"Man, this is like *deja vu*," Lucas commented, shifting his weight back and forth, his dress shoes squeaking softly as he did so. They were arguably the most well-dressed group in the ER.

"Do you guys think this has to do with those slugs Will was puking up?" Dustin asked quietly.

That jogged Mike's memory and he looked up at El who was nervously looking around at the unfamiliar faces surrounding them.

"What were you saying in the car about Will, El?" He asked, grabbing her attention. "More monsters?" He said in a hushed tone.

El nodded warily as the boys looked at her with wide eyes.

"Wait, how do you know this?" Lucas asked. "What 'monsters'?"

"Upside Down," El replied and the boys were quiet for a moment, processing this.

"So what now?" Dustin asked, his anxiety mounting. "I mean, if they get him back there and find some interdimensional creature just, I dunno, swimming around in his guts -"

"We'll all be in deep shit," Lucas finished and Dustin began to shift back and forth nervously.

"This is not good," He said, clutching his curly brown locks in his hands and tipping his ever-present cap in process. "This is so not good,"

Before they could say anything else, Jonathan came running through the double doors that led to the back, panicked and distraught.

"Whoa, what's going on?" Mike tried to stop him as he blew past but Jonathan didn't stop until he reached the payphone. He dug into his pocket for change and fumbled to get it into the machine.

"What happened?!" Lucas asked as the kids formed a circle around him.

"It's not good," Jonathan shook his head, tapping his foot and pacing back and forth, though the phone cord would only let him go a foot before he had to come back. "Mom?" His voice was desperate and high in pitch as tears pricked his eyes. "Mom, y-you need to get up here to Clarksville. Will's in the hospital,"

"What's wrong with Will?!" Mike tried to press but Jonathan ignored him as his eyes brimmed with tears. "What's happening?!" He looked back at his friends, especially El whose doe eyes were wide with fear and worry.

"They're taking him into surgery," Jonathan explained to his mom on the phone, looking at the kids and hoping they were listening. "They think his appendix ruptured or something,"

"His appendix?" Lucas looked around at the group.

"Yeah, okay, bye," Jonathan said, hanging up and running his hands through his shaggy brown hair. "Did you catch that?" He asked the kids encircling him.

"It's his appendix?" Dustin clarified but El shook her head.

"Not appendix," She said, without actually knowing what an appendix was. She knew the real problem and that was enough. "Stomach," She pointed to her own again. "Little monsters from Upside Down,"

"What?" Jonathan asked, confused and darting glances back at the double doors as he shifted anxiously. "What are you talking about?"

Mike and the others glanced at each other, silently agreeing that it was time to break their promise to Will. "Will's been throwing up a lot since he came back," Mike said, keeping his voice low enough that the other people around them couldn't hear.

"These weird slug things," Lucas said.

"From the Upside Down," Dustin added.

"What the hell?" Jonathan exclaimed. "Why didn't he tell us? Why didn't *any of you* tell us?"

"He made us promise not to," Dustin admitted guiltily.

"And he's been a lot better lately," Mike chimed in. "He hasn't thrown up in a long time so we all thought it was over,"

"Shit," Jonathan cursed under his breath, wiping the tears that had begun to flood his eyes. "I-I don't even know what to do with that information. I need to get back there," He said, brushing past them. "You guys should call your parents,"

The air was thick and heavy around them as the reality of the

situation began to sink in. Will was in significant danger and this time, there wasn't anything they could do to fix it. He was in the hands of the doctors and all they could do was wait and hope that he'd be able to pull through this.

"I've got quarters," Dustin said quietly, breaking the somber silence that had fallen over them as he dug into his pants pocket.

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Nancy was already dreading her mother's curious and speculative gaze as her cab pulled up in front of the house. Her evening at the Valentine's dance at school with Steve had not gone well and she'd cut it quite short as a result.

Everything had started off well enough but Nancy had still been as distracted as she'd been since her life turned upside down back in November. She tried to smile, she tried to enjoy the meaningless chatter and small talk with Steve's friends but after a while, the energy it'd taken to put up such a front had been drained and she didn't want to do it anymore.

"What's going on?" Steve had asked. "You were fine a few minutes ago,"

"Nothing," Nancy replied automatically, without actually thinking about the fact that she really wasn't fine. "I'm just... tired, that's all,"

Steve sucked in a breath, then escorted her over to a relatively empty hallway nearby so they could talk privately. "That's bull, Nance," He said, confronting her gently. "You haven't been yourself lately," He paused. "For a while actually,"

Nancy looked up at him, his hair coiffed perfectly. "I-I know," She admitted with a sigh. "It's just..."

"Is it Barb again?" Steve inquired and Nancy bit the inside of her lip. "I mean, I know you miss her and everything..."

"It's a lot of things," Nancy said quietly, looking away. While the loss of Barb had had a significant impact on her, Steve didn't know the whole truth of that situation. And to add her developing feelings for

Jonathan Byers to the mix? Nancy thought it wise to avoid that one.

"Look, I... I get it," Steve said, pulling her gaze back to him. "I mean, you know, your best friend leaves town, there was that whole... crazy shit that happened at the Byers'..." He said, furrowing his brow as he referred to the monster they'd fought alongside Jonathan. "But I mean, everything's back to normal now,"

"But it's not!" Nancy exclaimed, catching the unwanted attention of a few students around them as her eyes brimmed with tears that she vigorously fought back. "It's not back to normal," She said in a quieter voice.

"But why not?" Steve pressed. "I mean, it *could* be,"

"You make it sound so easy," Nancy murmured with the slightest tinge of bitterness.

"Well, I mean, it kind of is," Steve shrugged, becoming impatient. "You just, let shit go. That's how people deal with stuff in the real world,"

"The real world?" Nancy quirked an eyebrow. "Are you *trying* to be condescending?"

"No, I-" Steve backtracked. "I just mean, it doesn't have to be as hard as you're making it," He said but Nancy was beginning to fume at this point. "I mean, look around, we're at a school dance. No monsters, right? And I mean, friends move away or leave or whatever all the time. I'm sure Barb's fine," He said, completely oblivious to the way Nancy's blood was boiling at this point. "It's not like you're never gonna see her again. I mean, you guys were practically attached at the hip. I'm sure she'll get back in contact with you or somebody in Hawkins eventually. Hell, it happens all the time - people get bored and so they run away only to find it's not as exciting as they thought it'd be and they come home,"

Nancy glared up at him. "You just don't get it," She said, turning on her heel to walk away but Steve caught her arm.

"What don't I get?!"

"Any of it!" Nancy replied vehemently, yanking her arm away from him.

"You know what? I *don't* get it!" Steve exclaimed, raising his voice in frustration. He ignored the stares and snickers of the people around him. "Why can't things go back to how they were? What happened to the old Nancy?"

"She's gone," Nancy said evenly, her eyes boring holes into him before she walked away. "And I'm done,"

Now, as she made her way up to her front door, her heels in her hand and her bare feet padding along the cold sidewalk, she heaved a heavy sigh and stepped inside only to find her mom frantically running around.

"Mom?" Nancy said curiously, one eyebrow raised. "What's going on?"

"Mike just called," Karen said distractedly as rifled through her purse. "Will had to be taken by ambulance to the hospital so they're sitting in the ER now," She walked briskly over to the bottom of the staircase. "Ted! Make sure Holly's in bed in the next half hour!"

"Got it!" He called monotonously from upstairs.

"Wait, what's wrong with Will?" Nancy asked, dumbfounded and having difficulty keeping pace with her mom as she darted around the first floor, gathering her things and checking to make sure she was leaving the house in order.

"A stomach rupture? Something like that," Karen said, plucking her keys from the end table and slipping into her winter coat. "They're taking him into surgery and it's not looking good so I'm going up to make sure Mike's okay,"

"I-I'll come with you," Nancy said after a split second, turning to follow her mom back out into the night.

.....

Joyce was just about to run out the door when the shrill ring of the phone stopped her. Thinking it could be Jonathan calling from the

hospital again with an update, she ran over and grabbed the receiver.

"Jonathan?" She said desperately.

"No, it's me, Hopper," Hopper's gruff voice filled her ears and she glanced at the front door.

"Listen, Hop, I -"

"Joyce, is Will okay?" Hopper interrupted her and his question made her blood run cold.

"Wh-What?" She stammered. "How do you -"

"I can't tell you everything right now but I just learned some things that I think you should know,"

"Hop," Joyce said, her voice trembling as tears ran down her cheeks. "He's in the hospital now. Jonathan and the boys and El are all up there with him. I've gotta go,"

"Damnit," Hopper said under his breath. "Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can,"

.

By the time the adults made it to Clarksville, Will was in surgery and Jonathan and the kids had been escorted to another smaller waiting room deeper in the hospital. The girls and Emma's sister had already come and gone, unable to stay long per their parents' insistence they be home by a certain time. Still, they'd stayed as long as they could to offer their support. Hopper arrived with Becky shortly after Nancy, Karen, and Joyce. He'd figured it would be good to let Becky know what was going on and as soon as she'd heard the news, she'd gotten a neighbor to come keep an eye on Terry so she could leave.

This waiting area was less crowded and there had only been a couple other people in there at first but shortly after the group settled in, the couple had been called back to see their loved one.

A resident named Dr. Sanders had come out at one point just as Will was being rushed into surgery to update them on his situation.

Jonathan had been able to vaguely explain some of Will's symptoms and coupled with the tests they'd run, they'd deduced that he had 'parasites' in his stomach that had eaten through the lining of his stomach. They were taking him to surgery but his condition was critical. The doctors hadn't been certain of the type of parasites Will had but most of the people waiting already knew.

"Is he going to be okay?" Joyce had asked desperately, her cheeks stained with tears but her eyes fixed and hyper-alert now.

"It's touch and go, m'am," Dr. Sanders said solemnly. "We're going to do everything we can to save your son but we won't know the extent of the internal damage until we get in there. Our plan is to repair the tear in his stomach and try to prevent further complications but he's lost a lot of blood and the damage appears to be severe,"

"Complications?" Jonathan parroted, worried.

"With any perforation to the stomach, there is the risk of peritonitis - damage to the lining of the abdominal cavity," Dr. Sanders explained. "A tear such as Will's can leak bile, stomach acid, bacteria, and other things into his abdomen that could wreak havoc on his insides and lead to sepsis,"

"Oh god," Karen's hand flew up to her mouth.

"I've gotta get in there now but if you have any additional questions, you can check with the nurse's station," The resident said.

"How long will he be in surgery?" Joyce asked, her voice trembling.

"It's hard to say," Dr. Sanders replied. "But it could last several hours,"

Hopper braced Joyce as she took a few unsteady steps back. "Thank you," He nodded to the doctor as he helped Joyce to one of the cushioned chairs.

An hour went by and everyone was getting antsy. Hopper had taken Joyce outside for a smoke break at one point to update her on what he'd found at the lab.

"Remember those yellow pods we saw in the Upside Down?" He'd

asked her as she fumbled with her lighter, a cigarette dangling from her mouth. "The lab's been studying them for weeks now and I just found out what they know," He went on, taking the lighter from Joyce's trembling hands and lighting her cigarette for her. "Apparently that *thing* you saw was using those pods as some sort of egg sac. The lab's been collecting them and raising the little bastards but that got me thinkin' about how we found Barb when we were lookin' for Will,"

Joyce quietly recalled the grotesque image of the lifeless teen, her skin splotchy and discolored as thick slugs crept from her mouth, leaving a trail of slime in their wake.

"You think the same thing is happening to Will?" Joyce asked, taking a long, shaky drag on her cigarette as she leaned against the brick wall.

"Could be," Hopper said simply. "Remember he had one of those slugs down his throat when we found him,"

"Yeah," Joyce shuddered, not wanting to conjure those memories in her mind. "We all thought he was fine," She shrugged helplessly. "Apparently the boys told Jonathan that he's been vomiting up these slugs for months now," She shook her head in disbelief, a wave of emotion rising in her. "I-I don't understand it. Why didn't he say anything? I had no idea!" Tears flooded her eyes and Hopper captured her in a hug, holding her tightly against his chest as she shook with each sob. "*I had no idea*," He rubbed her back gently as she whimpered into his shirt.

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The waiting room was uncomfortably quiet. Jonathan had left abruptly with Nancy following after him a few minutes later, leaving Mike, Dustin, Lucas, El, Karen, and Becky alone. There was a TV in the corner playing an I Love Lucy rerun and generic landscape artwork decorating the walls. Lucas was reclined back in his chair, staring at the floor ahead with his arms crossed over his chest while Dustin rested his elbows on his knees, holding his face in his hands. Mike's foot bounced anxiously as he stared at the floor and El alternated between watching Mike and stewing in her own guilt and

worry. Her memory had been coming back in bits and pieces but it killed her that she hadn't been able to remember what was going on with Will until it was too late. Was it too late? The guilt felt like it was eating her alive. Friends told each other the truth. But if she couldn't remember, was it still wrong? Was it still a betrayal? It was in her mind because she could have kept Will safe. She could have prevented this if only she'd remembered sooner. She hadn't remembered seeing Will in the Upside Down or the yellow pods with dozens of slugs breaking free throughout the grim landscape. She hadn't remembered that there were now a myriad of little monsters growing in the Upside Down, a threat that frightened her but took a backseat to the present danger facing Will.

They could've gotten Will help and avoided whatever dangerous surgery he was undergoing right now. She'd risked everything to save her friends before but this incident made her feel powerless and weak. She could access places and things with her mind that no other person could - why couldn't she have accessed this one piece of information? A tear dripped down her face, soaking into the fabric of her dress.

Hopper and Joyce came back a little while later and after seeing Joyce's broken appearance and checking with Mike, Karen offered to escort Joyce down to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee. Becky was relatively quiet, rubbing a comforting hand over El's shoulder as Hopper sat down next to her and the group fell into silence once more.

.....

Nancy found Jonathan in a narrow corridor that housed a couple of vending machines. He was stuffing quarters into the machine as she walked up beside him, still clad in her red Valentine's dress and heels.

"Hey," She said quietly, moving to stand against the wall opposite the machines, behind him.

"Hi," Jonathan darted a glance in her direction but never made eye contact, instead returning his attention to the machine. He punched a couple of buttons and watched as the candy bar he was after came

closer, then stopped as the silver ring held onto it at the last minute. "Damnit!" He exclaimed and Nancy stepped forward, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Jonathan..."

"I'm fine!" He said, a little louder than he meant to, and she quickly retracted her hand. "Sorry," He mumbled, then turned back to the machine, banging a hand against the glass in an attempt to dislodge his snack.

"D-Do you wanna talk?" She offered quietly as he proceeded to kick the machine to no avail. He grabbed the sides of it, attempting to shake the candy bar free but when it didn't budge, the fragile structure he'd built up inside him collapsed and he leaned hard into the machine, his shoulders shaking with sobs.

"Hey, hey," Nancy put her hand on his arm and he avoided her gaze. "It's gonna be okay,"

"You don't know that," Jonathan bit back but his words didn't sting, they only made her more sympathetic. "He's got a freaking monster in his stomach!"

"They're gonna get whatever that thing is out, okay?" She tried to reassure him. "He's in surgery - they're gonna fix it,"

"Yeah? Well what if they can't? What if the damage is done?" Jonathan shot back, tears in his eyes as he did everything he could to keep them from falling. "What if he *dies* in there because I didn't know something was wrong?!"

"How could you have known?" Nancy said. "No one knew -"

"I should've known!" Jonathan exclaimed, finally making eye contact with her and with such intensity that it took her back for a second. "I'm supposed to look out for him, Nancy! That's how it's always been. Your brother said he didn't even wanna tell them this was going on - they just found out. Will made them promise not to tell anyone but *I* should've known," His breathing became more haggard and he momentarily refocused his energy, channeling his anger and

desperation into the vending machine as he kicked it once more, pounding on it with his fist until all of his energy left him and he slid down to the floor.

"This isn't your fault," Nancy said quietly, tucking her legs under her as she joined him on the linoleum. "You... you can't beat yourself up about it. Believe me, I should know..."

Jonathan shook his head, his hair falling over his face and blocking her view of his eyes. "He's my little brother," He said softly. "We thought we lost him once but this... this is actually happening. What if we really lose him this time?"

Unsure if there was anything she could say that could make things better, Nancy adjusted herself, moving closer to Jonathan so that she could slip a comforting arm around him. He accepted her touch, shifting slightly closer to her as thoughts of Will flooded his mind.

He'd spent Will's entire life being his protector and guardian. When their parents were fighting, when Lonnie was drunk and a bit too aggressive, when Will's heart was in danger of breaking because of Lonnie's rejection and judgment, Jonathan was there picking up the pieces. He made breakfast, he made sure Will was getting his homework done, he talked to him about the bullies at school and the drawings he was working on - everything Joyce couldn't do because she worked herself to the bone just trying to keep a roof over their heads. After the divorce, Lonnie had left them with a mountain of debt that they'd only begun to scrape away before Will's disappearance in the fall. Their little family had been a team and Will their most vulnerable player so of course Jonathan was extra protective of him. Of course he carried the weight and guilt of what was happening on his shoulders because for so long, that had been all he knew.

He hadn't realized he was silently crying until Nancy tentatively grabbed his hand and he looked at her, her face inches away from his.

"I... I don't know what to say," She admitted, her voice barely a whisper as she instinctively rested her head on his shoulder. The action was momentarily jarring for Jonathan who had not expected

that level of affection from her and he abruptly turned to face her again. "But I'm here," She said softly, her big blue eyes looking into his with a combination of empathy and something else he couldn't quite put a finger on.

"Thanks," He said, his voice scratchy for a second before he cleared his throat.

On a whim, Nancy leaned forward, closing the small gap between them as she left a gentle kiss on his cheek. Rather than react with shock or get wrapped up in his own feelings toward her, he sank back into the metal of the vending machine behind them, letting her lay her head on his shoulder and letting the fleeting warmth of her kiss calm the frenzied storm within him.

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Flashback

For all anyone could tell, the treatments at Hawkins National Laboratory were working for Sarah. She experienced periodic nausea and weakness for the first week or so after receiving the medication but her symptoms dissipated more readily and completely than they had during her standard chemotherapy regimen. It would be another week before her next phase of testing and round of medication but the Hoppers were beginning to let themselves be hopeful.

It was a sunny day in the early fall when Jim and Diane took their daughter to the park. She hadn't had the strength to run around in months and they could all use a day of normality to soothe the stress that had built up inside them.

"It's troll's favorite food!" Hopper growled playfully as he chased his daughter across the grassy lawn. It had yet to change colors with the season and was still as bright and green as ever. Diane stood by watching with a smile as the picturesque family she'd been missing came back to life before her eyes.

Sarah bounded away from her father happily, giggling all the while - a sound that brought joy beyond measure to her parents.

"Princess!" Hopper said, picking Sarah up and pretending to eat her stomach like the make-believe troll.

*"No, Daddy!" Sarah laughed happily as her father held her in his arms.
"No, Daddy. No!"*

"Roasted princess with paprika and gravy!" Hopper continued until Sarah suddenly stopped moving, her eyes fixed and terrified.

The world had gone black, if only for a few seconds. She was suddenly alone, her feet were wet, and all around her, there was nothing. She'd been to this place before during her first treatment with the lab. They'd given her medication and the doctors and nurses led her to the back where they helped her change into a wet suit. They'd put a heavy helmet on her head just before lowering her into a large cylinder of water and after a few minutes, she was in this place. This dark, scary place that looked like absolutely nothing. There was no one to talk to, nothing to touch or see or smell.

She'd been resistant at first, especially since her parents hadn't been allowed back with her, but a kind nurse who she'd befriended when she first got to the hospital stayed with her the entire time. She'd walked her up to the tank and promised to be there when she got out. She talked about medicine making her feel better and big girl things like being brave and doing what she was told, even if it was scary. It helped that Sarah had taken swim lessons at a young age and the medication they gave her made her a little calmer, a little sleepier. And with the promise that everything would be okay if she followed what the doctors said, she didn't put up a fight.

Outside of the tank, researchers discussed her condition and treatment, citing the neuroblastoma that had gone unnoticed for months until the swelling in her belly had become more noticeable. They spoke of the mets in her brain that had broken off from the original tumor, putting pressure on various cerebral structures and making them excited at the possibilities for their research. They compared the treatment process to that of 'the girl' who was close in age to Sarah at the time and therefore, a comparable case study.

Sarah began to hyperventilate in her father's arms, whimpering and gasping as the blackness disappeared and the world came back. Hopper

stopped his play-acting and he and Diane looked at their daughter with concern.

"Hey," He said gently, trying to assess what was going on as Sarah continued to breath heavily. "You alright?"

"What's going on?" Diane asked, worried as she reached for her daughter.

"Whoa," Hopper said, still alarmed by his daughter's breathing as Diane watched helplessly.

"What happened?"

"I don't know, I don't know," Hopper replied, setting Sarah on the ground so that she could stand, her breaths still coming erratically.

"Hey, you alright?" Hopper asked her again but she didn't reply, instead gazing out past them and wondering if the blackness would come back. "Whoa, whoa, whoa," He said as Sarah darted her gaze around anxiously, still panting. "Relax, relax," He tried to get her attention, tried to get her focus on him. "Honey, honey. Honey, just breathe," He said gently and Sarah tried to listen, gradually taking deeper, slower breaths as she realized the world was not changing anymore. She wasn't alone and the darkness had gone away. "Breathe, breathe, breathe," She finally looked at her dad, standing there, comforting her as her mom stood by, still worried. "In, and out," Hopper coached her as he cradled her head gently. "Slow, slow, slow," He modeled a deep inhale for her and Sarah listened and watched, still agitated but gradually calming down. "In and out with me," He went on, breathing deeply and exhaling slowly until her own breathing returned to normal. "In... and out..."

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"Come on baby, don't fear the reaper. Baby take my hand, don't fear the reaper..."

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[A/N: Please review! ^_^]

31. Careless Whisper

[A/N: HOLY CRAP, I'm sorry for the absence! The end of this semester took a lot out of me but all's well that ends well! Thank you all SO MUCH for your reviews and sticking around. Your kind words gave me smiles when I was pulling my hair out from school XD

To answer Lucy's question: I'm thinking there will be about 10 more chapters to this story, give or take. We've still got a bunch to cover but based on my outline, that's what it's looking like.

You guys are so, so amazing and I love hearing your thoughts on what's going on! Please let me know what you think of this next chapter and I will try to get the next one done soon!]

Chapter 31: Careless Whisper (by George Michael)

"Time can never mend the careless whispers of a good friend..."

.....

As the hours dragged without an update on Will, the group became understandably anxious and exhausted. Dustin had spent much of the past hour pacing and driving the others a little crazy before finally settling into a chair. Karen had wanted to take Mike and Nancy home once it got closer to 11 o'clock but both had vehemently insisted on staying. She probably would have stayed, too but she needed to tend to Holly and even though Ted had assured her he could handle it, she wasn't confident in his ability to get their three year old to go to bed and *stay* in bed.

Hopper had insisted the kids would be fine staying with them and that he'd get them all home safe and sound. Knowing they were with three adults in a hospital and given the unusual and dire circumstances, Karen had an easier time obliging and letting her children stay.

By the time midnight rolled around, Will was still in surgery and while everyone was exhausted, they were fighting to stay awake in

case any news came through about Will's condition. Joyce had already been to the nurses' station four times asking for an update but so far, all they could say was that he was still in surgery and as soon as they had an update from the surgeons, they'd inform her.

Nancy was feeling somewhat guilty about her affectionate interaction with Jonathan earlier that evening. As they sat next to one another in the waiting room, Nancy couldn't help the cascade of thoughts flowing through her mind like the thunderous downpour of a waterfall. She couldn't deny the feelings that were threatening to burst through her chest when she was around Jonathan. They'd simply grown too strong to ignore at this point. But she replayed her argument with Steve over and over in her mind. Had she actually *broken up* with him? Did *he* think they were broken up? Was that really what she wanted? Caught between unequivocal certainty and the a fear of the unknown like a spider that had somehow entangled itself in its own web, Nancy wasn't sure what to do.

Guilt was eating away at El, gnawing at her insides, as she wished over and over that she could have remembered her encounter with Will sooner. If only she'd remembered what she'd known in the Upside Down but everything had been such a blur, coming back to her in bits and pieces, how could she have known what she didn't remember? Still, she felt like it was her fault that Will might die and her friends were in such pain.

She watched Mike especially. He hadn't spoken in hours and he sat now with his foot bouncing erratically and his hands fidgeting in anxious anticipation. He alternated between leaning forward on his knees, resting his elbow against the armrest, and leaning his head back against the wall. His constant motion did nothing to curb the tension in the room.

Suddenly a surgical nurse in sea-green scrubs entered the room along with a resident in light blue ones, causing everyone to snap their heads in her direction, immediately alert.

"What's going on?" Joyce asked, standing up. Her hair was a mess from running her hands through it and the skin under her eyes hung heavy with fatigue. "Do you have news? How is Will? Is he okay?"

"He's still in surgery," The nurse said, gesturing for Joyce to calm down a bit but she herself was not relaxed. "We've run into complications,"

"Oh god," Joyce breathed, her hand flying up to her mouth before the nurse could continue.

"We've extracted some sort of parasitic creature from your son's stomach," The resident explained quickly and everyone struggled to keep up with his pace. "It appears it had begun to tear through the lining of his stomach. We were able to prevent damage due to stomach acid leaking from the tear into his abdomen, however, in the process of removing the parasite, it managed to do damage to his surrounding organs. We were able to repair some moderate damage to his liver and we removed his spleen and gallbladder, however, he needs a new kidney. The parasite made a tear in one of his kidneys that we were able to repair but completely destroyed the other in the process of being extracted from your son's abdomen,"

Hearing this made her feel like the world was about to fall out from beneath her but she wasn't about to falter when her son needed her.

"Take my kidney," She said without hesitation. "I'm O negative; it should work, right?"

"Okay," The resident nodded. "We'll take you back to run some tests and ensure you'll be a good match but you should also know he's lost a lot of blood,"

"I'm his *mother*, I don't see how I *wouldn't* be," Joyce said insistently. "I can donate to anyone. That's what the Red Cross said. Does he need blood?"

"If you're donating a kidney, we can't allow you to donate blood at the same time," The resident advised. "That would be too much of a strain on your body,"

"I don't care!" Joyce exclaimed. "*Does he need it?*"

The resident and nurse exchanged uncertain glances that only made Joyce's anxiety worse.

"God dammit, answer me!" She exclaimed.

"Yes, he does," The resident replied.

"We can donate!" Mike suddenly piped up and the other kids leaned forward, nodding vigorously in agreement.

"No, you can't," Hopper said, shutting them down immediately. "You're too young,"

"No, we're not!" Dustin protested, then turned to Lucas. "Are we?" Lucas shrugged.

"There is no way in hell you kids are donating blood so settle back down and *drop it*," Hopper said sternly. "They've got rules about this kind of thing and even if they didn't, you think I'm gonna let you do something like that without getting your parents' consent?"

"That's such bull!" Mike exclaimed, crossing his arms in frustration and slouching back against the cushioned seat.

"Mike..." El said softly, trying to comfort him as she gingerly placed a hand on his forearm but he yanked it away.

"Mike, *what?*" He snapped bitterly, sinking lower into the chair, his brow furrowed angrily as he stared at the floor. El sat quietly, watching him sadly as the bubbling tension within him finally boiled over. "Why didn't you tell us sooner?" He exclaimed quite loudly, turning toward her. "Will might *die*, do you *get* that?"

Hopper glanced at Joyce who had visibly paled at Mike's comment. "*Wheeler!*" He reprimanded fiercely.

While angry, Mike's voice was taut with the strain of trying to keep from falling apart. They'd thought they'd lost their friend once. The idea of going through that kind of pain again was more than Mike could withstand, especially as his exhaustion settled in. "You said you were remembering things *weeks* ago!"

"I-I -" El stammered, her doe eyes watering as Mike's anger and her own guilt made her feel like she was suffocating. The expectant, yet irritated expression on Mike's face only made it harder. "I didn't

remember...this..." She said quietly, shamefully, as she sank into her own chair.

"Alright, that's enough," Dustin interjected but Hopper interrupted him. They had more important things to worry about than the quarrels of a few pre-teens.

"What's his blood type?" Hopper asked the resident, ignoring the kids' dissent.

"He's B positive," Joyce replied automatically before the resident had the chance to respond.

"I could donate blood," Becky, who had been quiet up to this point, spoke up. "I'm O positive. That'll work, right?"

"Yes," The resident nodded. "That should be fine. Mrs. Byers, you can come with me and I'll help you get prepped for the surgery and you -" He paused as he looked at Becky.

"Becky. Ives," She replied, standing up.

"Nurse Jones will assist you in the blood draw," He gestured to the nurse beside him who gestured for Becky to come with them.

"Thank you," Joyce said softly, her face etched with gratitude as she looked at Becky.

"Not a problem," Becky said as if she'd done something simple like hold the door or bake a casserole as opposed to playing a role in saving the life of a kid she didn't even really know. Regardless, Joyce was thankful beyond words for the gesture and if she'd had any doubts before regarding Becky's genuineness, they were long gone by now.

Shortly after Joyce and Becky were escorted away, Mike abruptly stood up and walked toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Lucas asked and Mike turned around with a huff.

"I'm going to the snack machine," He replied, rolling his eyes

indignantly. "Is that okay?"

Lucas narrowed his eyes, doing a double-take at Mike's unnecessary sarcasm which was all the response the moppy-haired kid needed before ducking out of the room and disappearing down the hall.

Nancy glanced at Jonathan who had been quiet up until this point. His thin brown hair hung in front of his face as he stared at the floor. His dark eyes seemed simultaneously fixed yet zoned out, his eyebrows slightly furrowed, as Nancy searched her mind for something to say.

"Are you... okay?" She asked softly, discreetly resting a hand on his shoulder.

"Huh?" Jonathan stirred. "Y-Yeah," He replied, his voice heavy with the myriad of emotions weighing him down. "Just um, just thinking, I guess,"

Nancy nodded, unsure of what to say next. "It um," She started, not sure where she was going with this but she felt the need to talk. Sitting here in silence was just about driving her crazy. Even the kids were silent again and Hopper had begun to slowly pace around the room with his hands on his hips. The tension was enough to make her lose it. "That was really nice of Becky to offer to donate blood for Will,"

"Yeah, I guess," Jonathan said distractedly, his gaze still fixed on the floor. "It should've been me, though,"

Nancy's brows stitched together. "You?"

"Yeah, I'm his brother," Jonathan replied. "But we have different blood types so..." He trailed off. "It wouldn't work,"

"Ah," Nancy nodded and pursed her lips, settling into silence again.

El was sniffing quietly, tears escaping her eyes and slowly sliding down her cheeks as her lip trembled. She'd mastered the art of crying silently but her face more than made up for what she lacked in volume.

"Hey, don't worry about Mike," Lucas said, moving to take the now empty seat next to El. "This... it isn't your fault, okay?"

"Exactly," Dustin agreed, putting a hand on her shoulder as it shook with her silent sobs. "It's... it's all our fault,"

El looked up at him, her watery eyes marked with confusion and interest.

"He's right," Lucas agreed with a sigh. "We didn't do anything. Will was puking up those slugs and we should've told somebody,"

El pursed her lips as she looked back and forth between the boys as they attempted to comfort her.

"Mike's just scared," Dustin explained. "He knows it wasn't all your fault but he just gets his head up his ass sometimes,"

"That's for sure," Lucas commented with a snort that elicited the tiniest of smiles from El.

Becky returned fifteen minutes later with a piece of gauze on her inner elbow and a strip of medical tape wrapped around her arm.

"Any news?" Hopper asked when she walked in but Becky shook her head.

"Not really," She said, taking a seat. "They took my blood and it looks like Joyce is good to go. They're prepping her for surgery now,"

Hopper nodded his understanding, his brow still furrowed as he continued to pace. Becky looked over at El who, while she had calmed considerably, was still the most visibly upset person in the room at the moment. Her eyes were glassy with tears that hadn't had the chance to fall and her cheeks glistened with tear-stains.

"Hey El," Becky said softly, leaning forward in her seat to face El who was sitting perpendicular to her. "Are you okay?"

El glanced at the young woman, pursing her lips and responding neither yes nor no. Lucas and Dustin shared a knowing look but said nothing.

Becky paused, a little uncertain of herself but motivated by the compassion she'd developed for this girl. "Here, c'mon," She stood up, taking a step toward El and offering her hand.

El stared at it before accepting, allowing her aunt's hand to clasp around her own as stood up for the first time in hours. Her legs felt shaky as Becky led her out of the waiting area.

"Let's go for a walk," Becky said as they moved to the doorway. "That always helps me,"

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The vending machines weren't far from their little waiting area but Mike had lingered for quite some time. He didn't actually have any money with him but he just needed to get away. His head felt foggy with fatigue and his emotions were more heightened as a result. He was angry, terrified, and upset and they were all tangled up in one another like a devastating whirlwind. He shouldn't have snapped at El the way he did. Sure, he wished she would've remembered what she'd known about Will's condition but he also knew it wasn't her fault. How could it have been? It's not like she would have knowingly kept that information a secret if she knew Will was in danger. The only time she ever blatantly kept something from them was when she didn't tell them everything about the lab when they were looking for Will before and *that* was to *protect* them.

It'd been like his words escaped before he could even think about what he was saying. He hadn't wanted to upset El but he knew he had to have hurt her with what her said. She was tough and capable of destroying pretty much anything or anyone who got in her way but she was also fragile and sensitive with other things. The dichotomy was part of what fascinated him about her.

And if he was really being honest, he felt immense guilt himself. He should have told someone about what was happening to Will, regardless of Will's requests that he not. People don't just throw up slugs when everything is okay. But Mike had been complacent to go along with Will's plan, dangerous though it was, and for what? Because he wanted to focus on finding Eleven? Because he wanted to pretend everything was back to normal in their little friend group?

Because he didn't want Will to be mad at him for telling? It didn't matter because the truth was right in his face now and that truth was that he *still* let Will down by not doing what he should've done to help him, even if that wasn't what Will wanted at the time. All the times that Will was feeling sick or throwing up slugs or disappearing into the Upside Down, this... whatever it was... was hurting Will and no one said or did anything about it. They played D&D, they rode bikes, they watched movies, they did *nothing*.

Mike hadn't even noticed that he'd started crying until his eyes became bleary and he had to wipe them in order to see. He leaned back against the wall by the vending machine, resting his head against the cement block and hoping no one else would come down this way.

He felt helpless. After everything they'd gone through back in the fall to save Will, after everything they'd sacrificed, *including Eleven*, Will could still end up dying. And this time it wouldn't be the Demogorgon's fault; not directly, at least. It would be their fault, *his fault*, because they didn't *do* anything to save him.

Overcome by his frustration and despondency, Mike turned to the vending machine and kicked it as hard as he could. He held the sides of the machine, his eyes flooding with tears, as he kicked it again and again until his body reminded him that it was exhausted and he lost his momentum. He sunk back into the wall, his shoulders heaving with sobs as his foot began to throb and he directed his anger at his pained foot. Irrational though that was, it was easier to blame his foot for being weak and unable to withstand a few kicks than it was to be angry at himself for failing his friend.

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Becky led El outside and despite it being relatively cold, the change in temperature was refreshing. There was a low brick wall encircling a garden nestled against the building. Whatever had been in the garden in the spring and summer was long gone by now aside from a few year-round plants. The two sat down on the brick wall and El tucked her dress under her legs to capture the heat.

"Here," Becky said as she slipped out of her jacket and put it over El's

bare shoulders. "Better?"

El pulled on the brown jacket and nodded, looking down at the sidewalk in front of them.

Becky inhaled deeply, sighing as she looked up at the sky. The sky was relatively clear and only a few scattered clouds impeded their views of the expanse of stars above them.

"I know you're worried," Becky said. "But I was back there with the doctors," El glanced up at her. "I'm not gonna lie to you - Will's condition is very serious but these doctors... they know what they're doing, okay? He's in good hands,"

El looked down at her lap, wringing her hands together. "My fault," She said, her voice barely a whisper.

"What?" Becky said, shaking her head. "No, El," She scooted closer, wrapping El in a hug. "Not your fault, okay?" She turned El's head to look at her. "This was *not* your fault, okay? Don't beat yourself up over this,"

El thought about telling Becky that it actually *was* her fault. She'd known about Will's condition for a long time and if she'd only *remembered*... Well, maybe they wouldn't be in this position. But while Becky knew a lot about El's abilities at this point, she still was shy to share them with her. And more than that, she didn't want to vocalize what she was feeling. She didn't want to hear the words that were torturing her in her mind.

"You know how many times I blamed myself for what happened to your mom?" Becky said, catching El's attention. "Yeah, I blamed myself for that, did you know that?" El shook her head. "We were pretty close growing up, I guess, but she got all mixed up in this lab stuff. I didn't think it was a good idea but I didn't really do anything to stop her. I mean, your mom, at least back then, was pretty strong-willed... Hell, she still is, I guess. I didn't think she'd listen even if I tried. And then after... after you were born, I guess, I didn't believe her. We didn't have any proof you existed and everything she was saying sounded... crazy..." Becky trailed off. "She lost it. In here," Becky tapped on her own temple. "And hell, maybe that wouldn't

have happened if someone believed her or supported her when she needed it. Maybe I could've done something to keep that from happening," Becky shrugged. "That's what I told myself at least,"

El looked down, glancing back at the garden behind them. She apathetically traced her fingers through the cold, compounded dirt.

"My point is," Becky said, leaning in a bit to get El's attention. "The guilt might always be there but it's what you do with it that matters. Don't drown in it. I don't think this was your fault but me saying that isn't necessarily gonna take your feelings away, is it?" She looked to El expectantly who didn't respond. "It's not. So you do what you can to make the situation better. Does that make any sense?"

El inhaled, furrowing her brow in thought before giving a slight nod. "Yes,"

A smile cracked the corner of Becky's lips. "Good," She said. "How are you feeling? Ready to go back inside?"

El nodded and the two stood up before heading back into the hospital.

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When Mike returned to the waiting room, he immediately noticed that El wasn't there. After calming himself down, he'd realized he needed to apologize to her for snapping the way he did.

"Where's El?" He asked, looking around.

"She's with Becky," Lucas replied. "Man, you really upset her,"

Mike exhaled sharply, not really wanting to be called out on how he'd treated El but also knowing that Lucas was right.

"Seriously, Mike," Dustin continued as he watched Mike return to his seat. "You know damn well this wasn't her fault,"

"I know!" Mike replied defensively, sinking into his chair. The fact that his sister was sitting adjacent to them and trying not to be obvious in her staring was making him feel more self-conscious and

irritated.

"All of us should have or *could have* done something," Dustin continued.

"God, I *know!*" Mike said, exasperated. "I know, okay? I'm gonna apologize,"

"You better," Lucas said straight-forwardly. "She was a mess before Becky took her out. None of us knew how bad Will's situation was, *including* El,"

Mike groaned, sinking down into his chair. He hated being called out on his mistakes but he also knew his friends were completely right. He had to make it up to her and he spent the time brainstorming things he could possibly do. He still hadn't gotten around to fixing that frame he'd made for her before so maybe he could fix that. He suddenly remembered the valentine he'd made for her in the car but in the excitement of the night, he'd forgotten to give it to her. He was debating whether now was an appropriate time to give it to her when she and Becky walked back into the waiting room.

El's eyes locked with Mike's as she tentatively took steps toward the chair between Mike and Dustin.

"How'd that go?" Hopper asked Becky as she took a seat and he finally sat down beside her.

Becky shrugged. "We had a good talk, I think," She replied. "Mostly me talking but that's nothing new"

Hopper nodded thoughtfully. "Thanks for doing that," He said, his other words dying in his throat. He wanted to thank her on Joyce's behalf, too, for donating blood. It was amazing to see how she'd gone from being a bit skeptical and unsure of herself a month ago to now blossoming into this almost-mother figure. It was impressive and he wanted to commend her on it but their recent past halted him for fear of turning a compliment into something awkward.

"No problem," Becky replied nonchalantly, feeling equally as unsure of how to navigate the conversation for similar reasons.

Meanwhile, Lucas, who was now sitting on Mike's other side, discreetly elbowed him in the ribs as El sat down. "Ow, hey!" Mike shot his friend a glare but Lucas returned his expression with a pointed look of his own before nodding in El's direction.

Mike looked at El from the side of his eye before sighing and turning to fully face her. "Hey El?" He said quietly and she carefully turned to meet his gaze. "I... I-I'm really sorry... I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. I was just scared... about Will. It's um, it's not your fault,"

The words seemed to have a therapeutic effect on El and the tension in her visibly dissipated. Mike watched her for some sort of sign or word that would convey that she accepted his apology. But when she leaned closer to him, her body crossing over the armrest that separated them, to rest her head on his shoulder, he knew.

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"We need to be careful," Brenner said to the agent standing before his desk. "You're sure your source is credible?"

"Absolutely," The agent nodded, his hands clasped behind his back. "He was one of our senior research directors before the incident in November,"

"I see," Brenner said thoughtfully, tapping his chin as he rested an elbow on the mahogany wood of his desk.

"Should I dispatch units?" The agent asked eagerly.

"Not yet," Brenner shook his head. "I have another idea,"

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"To the heart and mind, ignorance is kind. There's no comfort in the truth, pain is all you'll find..."

32. I'm Still Standing

[A/N: Hey guys! So because I kept you waiting so long, I felt inclined to write another chapter XD This one's a bit shorter but we're moving along in the plot so yay lol Thanks for your feedback so far! You're all awesome and I'm so happy you're enjoying the story. I love writing for you guys.

Also, I wanted to clear up what could be some confusion in the previous chapter. I explain it a bit more in this chapter and maybe I should've included this scene then but it's too late now. Anyway, as much as Jonathan would have liked to donate blood to Will, he couldn't because he has a different blood type. In the story, Lonnie is type AB which means he and Joyce each have a 50% chance of any child they have being A or B because Lonnie can pass on either allele. Joyce's O blood type is recessive so they're not gonna be O unless Lonnie has a O allele to combine with hers. Will got the B allele which is dominant and Jonathan got an A. So to make their lives more difficult and give Lonnie an extra asshole factor, Will is type B and Jonathan is type A, all thanks to the father of the year himself! :)

I really appreciate that you guys take the time to review my chapters and tell me what you think and give feedback. It helps me to be a better writer and helps motivate me to keep going. You're the real MVPs! ^_]

Chapter 32: I'm Still Standing (by Elton John)

"You could never know what it's like, your blood like winter freezes just like ice, and there's a cold, lonely light that shines from you. You'll wind up like the wreck you hide behind that mask you use..."

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Joyce's surgery took a few hours and by that time, everyone in the waiting room aside from Hopper had fallen asleep. Dustin was leaning against Lucas and El's head had never left Mike's shoulder. Nancy had rolled her jacket up and used it as a pillow on the back of her chair and Jonathan had slouched down in his seat, reclining his

head back against the back of his chair. Becky's arms were crossed over her chest and her head lolled to the side as she slept.

"Hi there," A nurse they hadn't seen before entered the room, smiling at Hopper. "You're the only one still up, huh?" She said, looking around the room. Despite her attempts to remain quiet, Jonathan stirred a bit.

"Apparently," Hopper replied, his voice deep and heavy with fatigue. "What do ya got?" He asked, standing up from his seat to try and help himself stay awake.

"Mrs. Byers is out of surgery," The nurse said. "She's in recovery now and should wake up shortly,"

"And the boy?" Hopper inquired.

"The new kidney is being attached as we speak," She replied. "If all goes well, he should be out of surgery in a couple hours. They were able to keep him stable so now we just have to hope the new kidney takes,"

"Well, it should, shouldn't it?" Hopper said, furrowing his brow. "I mean, that's what all those tests were for, right?"

"Yes," She said. "But there's always the possibility that the body will simply reject the kidney anyway. And while they were able to repair the damage to his other one, there's no telling what kind of functionality it will have. They both sustained quite a bit of damage, I'm told,"

"Mom's awake?" Jonathan murmured, fighting away at the sleep that had filled his eyes. "Can we see her?"

"She should be soon," The nurse smiled at the teen. "And yes, that's fine. I can take you to her now, if you like?" She looked between Jonathan and Hopper and the chief nodded.

Jonathan and Hopper followed the nurse out of the waiting room and through several hallways to a recovery room on the other side of the building. Joyce was lying in a hospital bed with her head reclined back against a pillow and a few IVs still in her arm. She was

beginning to stir when they walked in.

"Hey," She smiled, her voice a bit raspy.

"Hey Mom," Jonathan smiled, hurrying over to her bedside.

"How's Will?" Joyce asked, looking up at her eldest expectantly.

"He's still in surgery," Jonathan answered. "But he's doing better, I think,"

"Good," Joyce said tiredly, lying back against the pillow again.

"The nurse told us on our way in here that you were gonna have to stay here for a couple days to recover," Hopper said, coming around to Joyce's other side. "If there's anything you or the boys need -"

"Oh Hop," Joyce smiled, her eyes closed. "You don't have to -"

"Don't fight me on this, Joyce," Hopper cut her off. "You don't always have to be so stubborn, you know,"

Joyce chuckled lightly, opening her eyes a bit to look at him. "You're one to talk,"

"I'll help with whatever you need, Mom," Jonathan offered. "I wish it could've been my kidney or *something*..."

"Oh sweetheart," Joyce said, cupping her son's face in her hand. "Don't worry about it. It's not your fault,"

"Why couldn't you?" Hopper asked Jonathan curiously. "You're his brother, you two should be similar enough, right?"

"You would think," Jonathan replied bitterly.

"Lonnie's blood type is AB," Joyce supplied and Jonathan scoffed.

"Yeah, he screws us even when he's not around,"

"So Jonathan's type A but Will is type B," Joyce explained to Hopper who just stared at them with interest. "They had a blood drive at church around Christmas and since Jonathan is 17, he was able to

donate, too," She chuckled. "I'm not a doctor, Hop, it's just still fresh in my mind,"

"Whatever you say," Hopper shrugged. "So do you need anything?"

"I think I'm okay," Joyce replied. "Probably going to go back to sleep, honestly. I can barely keep my eyes open,"

"Probably a good idea," Hopper nodded, walking around her bed and toward the door.

"Let me know as soon as Will wakes up, though," Joyce said urgently.

"I know," Hopper said. "I will; don't worry,"

"Do you need me to stay?" Jonathan asked but Joyce shook her head.

"No, you go back with Hop," His mother instructed. "You should be there whenever Will wakes up," She offered a hopeful smile that he returned.

"Okay," He nodded. "I will,"

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"Hey, everything okay?" Nancy asked groggily when Jonathan sat back down next to her. It was almost 4 am but after being in the hospital for so long, time didn't seem real.

"Yeah," Jonathan replied. "Mom's out of surgery. She's good,"

"Good," Nancy said with half-lidded eyes as she yawned. "What about Will?"

"Don't know yet," Jonathan said. "But it sounds like it's not as bad as it was before,"

"That's good," Nancy said hopefully. "That's really good,"

"Yeah," Jonathan let his voice trail off. He didn't want to get ahead of himself and fool himself into thinking Will was out of danger, however, he was feeling a lot more optimistic than he had been

several hours ago.

"He'll be okay," Nancy said, reaching for Jonathan's hand and catching him off-guard. "He's tougher than we give him credit for,"

"Yeah," Jonathan sighed, the touch of her soft skin over his hand having an instantaneous calming effect. "Yeah, I guess you're right,"

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Another couple of hours passed and a hint of daylight was beginning to peek through the blinds on the windows. It was still dark outside but the sky was pink, an impending sunset only an hour or so away.

By this time, Jonathan and Hopper were still awake but Nancy had fallen back asleep. Mike had also woken up but was still reclined in his chair, not wanting to move and disturb El who was still sleeping soundly on his shoulder. He watched an old sitcom rerun on the TV across the room. The volume was muted and the captions were on but he only half-cared about what was going on. His mind was numb with exhaustion and his back sore with an uncomfortable night's rest.

A knock on the doorway to the waiting room caught their attention. "Morning, everyone," Dr. Sanders said in a hushed voice but his presence immediately alerted those who were awake. Mike instinctively sat up, jostling El's head and she sleepily shifted her weight off of him, looking around.

"How's Will?" Jonathan asked. "Is he okay? Is he out of surgery?"

"He's doing great," Dr. Sanders replied happily. "The kidney took, he's stabilized, and we were able to repair the damage caused by the parasite,"

"Can we see him?" Mike inquired hopefully.

"You can but only a couple of you at a time," Dr. Sanders advised. "We don't want to overwhelm him. He's coming out of anesthesia now so I can take a couple of you to see him now,"

Jonathan stood up, stretching his legs quickly before walking over to the doorway.

"Can I come?" Mike asked, looking between Hopper and Jonathan.

"Go ahead, kid," Hopper nodded to the doorway and Mike was up in a flash, excitedly following behind Jonathan and Dr. Sanders.

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"It's all here?" Dr. Brenner inquired as an agent handed him a video tape.

"I believe so, sir," The agent replied affirmatively. "I went and picked it up myself,"

"Well then, let's see," Dr. Brenner said, slipping the tape into the VCR and waiting for the screen to crackle to life. They were in the surveillance room of the lab and while many of the employees had long since gone home and most wouldn't be back for another hour or so, the news of this potential breakthrough had been enough to sustain Brenner through the night.

As the video began to play, they could see the hallway of a hospital corridor. The footage had obviously come from another security camera at the hospital, just as the agent had promised. Dr. Brenner watched with scrutiny as the seemingly mundane images played across the screen until a particular face caught his eye.

"My guy says he recognized her when they checked in. He didn't think much of it until they found out this friend she came in with had one of the *specimens* trapped in his stomach," The agent explained. "So he went to their security room and took the footage for us,"

His eyebrows lifted when he saw her. Despite the longer length to her hair and the fancy dress she wore, there was no mistaking her. "We found her," Dr. Brenner's lips curved into a smile and the corners of his eyes crinkled. "Well done, son,"

"Of course, sir," The agent nodded respectfully, returning his attention to the tape. "Who is that woman she's with?"

Dr. Brenner watched as El walked down the hallway, a woman's arm draped comfortably over her shoulders as they made their way out of the camera's view. "Let's see," He said, rewinding the tape until the

twosome were closer to the camera, then out of sight again. Pressing play, he slowed the footage down as they appeared on screen again, this time closer. As the woman turned to look at the girl, seemingly to say something to her, Brenner paused the video and studied the woman's features. "Interesting..."

"What is it, sir?" The agent inquired, tilting his head as he stared at the mysterious woman on screen. "Do you recognize her?"

"I believe so,"

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"Jonathan?" Will's voice was frail and raspy as he slowly woke up from his anesthesia. "What... what happened?"

"You're in the hospital, buddy," Jonathan said, unable to contain his smile or the tears of relief in his eyes. "We're all here,"

"The hospital?" Will parroted, still a little disoriented.

"Hey Will," Mike said tentatively. "I'm glad you're okay,"

Will tried to pull himself into a sitting position but he winced and Jonathan quickly stopped him. "Don't move, Will," He said. "You just had surgery,"

"Those slugs you've been puking up?" Mike explained. "One of them tried to tear your insides apart,"

Will's eyes widened and he looked at Jonathan.

"We all know about it," Jonathan said, knowing what Will was thinking. "It's okay; I just wish you would've told us,"

"I... I didn't want you guys to worry," Will confessed, looking down at his lap.

"That doesn't matter now," Jonathan said. "All that matters is that you're safe,"

Will sighed contentedly, sinking deeper into his pillow. "Where is

everyone? Where's mom?"

"Mom's okay," Jonathan answered. "You needed a kidney because that *thing* messed up both of yours so she gave you one of hers,"

"Really?" Will's eyes widened. "Wow,"

"Everyone else is in the waiting room," Mike added. "Should I go get them?"

"Remember, the doctor said not to bring everyone in at once," Jonathan advised, then added. "I should go tell Mom you're awake first, though,"

"Okay," Will smiled and Jonathan disappeared from the room.

After a moment, Mike spoke, "Hey Will?"

"Yeah?" The small boy turned to his friend.

"I um," Mike faltered over his words, pushing himself to go on as he fidgeted with his hands. "I'm really sorry I um... I feel like I should've done something,"

"Done what?" Will asked. "I asked you not to tell anyone. That probably wasn't my best idea but I'm okay," He said reassuringly. "Don't feel bad,"

"I guess," Mike said, not thoroughly convinced but he didn't want to press the issue.

The next few hours were spent with gleeful rotations of friends and family in and out of Will's hospital room. Joyce wasn't able to see him yet because she needed to rest herself but her relief at knowing her baby boy was okay was immense.

Once the excitement wore off, however, everyone realized exactly how sleep-deprived they truly were. Since Will needed to rest and recover anyway, Hopper didn't catch much dissension from the kids when he decided it was time to take them home. Becky took El back to their house and Hopper gave Lucas and Dustin rides back to Hawkins. Jonathan offered Nancy and Mike a ride back to their

house, taking the keys to his mom's car.

As the trio pulled into the Wheeler's driveway, the sun was beaming with morning light that could have been mistaken for a summer's radiance if not for the lingering patches of snow on the ground and the cool touch of the window glass.

Mike dragged himself out of the car, more than ready to climb into bed and sleep all day. His mom was already up and Hopper had been keeping her updated on everything so the front door was unlocked and he anticipated she'd try to rope him into eating breakfast.

"Hey Nancy," Jonathan said as Nancy opened her door and moved to get out. "Could um, could I talk to you for a sec?"

Mike looked back, shooting his sister an impatient look but she waved him away. She watched as he huffed irritably, shook his head, then headed up the sidewalk into the house.

"What is it?" Nancy asked, pulling her door closed.

"I um..." Jonathan paused, running a hand through his disheveled, greasy hair. He was overdue for a shower after spending the night in the hospital. "I just... wanted to thank you. I guess? You didn't have to stay at the hospital last night,"

"Don't worry about it," Nancy said nonchalantly. "No big deal,"

"No, actually, it was," Jonathan countered. "I uh, I really appreciate everything you did... and said. It helped a lot,"

Nancy pursed her lips, looking down shyly. "I'm glad,"

When she looked back up at him, her big blue eyes mesmerizing him as they always did, he felt like he was in a daze. Maybe it was the connection they'd seemed to have been building lately or maybe it was the sheer mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion of the past 12 hours but something pushed him and he soon found himself leaning in closer and closer to her, an impulse he'd neither tried to act on nor resist. When their lips met, the warmth of the kiss sent shockwaves through both of them and Jonathan couldn't believe what he was doing; he hadn't thought it through at all. Maybe that

was the only reason it was actually happening. Nancy found herself getting lost in the sensation of his lips over hers. Part of her wanted to stay just like that, even forgetting the inevitable embarrassment that could come if either of her parents looked outside and saw her sitting in the car kissing Jonathan Byers. But it only took a few moments for her to realize she couldn't do this. Not yet. Is this what she really wanted? She thought so. Probably. But she still had unfinished business to tend to with Steve and while kissing Jonathan felt so good and *right*, it didn't change the fact that now was not the time.

"I-I'm sorry," Nancy murmured, pulling away.

"No, I... I..." Jonathan countered, quickly panicking over his sudden boldness. "I shouldn't have done that," He said shamefully, looking down and away, anywhere but at her.

Nancy thought about telling him it was okay, telling him she'd liked it and that she didn't actually want him to stop but everything she could possibly say felt like it would only lead to more of the same. She needed to deal with things first. She needed to figure out what she was going to do about Steve and how she was going to do it and before she could do any of that, she needed to go to sleep. She was much too vulnerable right now and the longer she sat in the car with Jonathan, the more likely she was to end up kissing him again.

"I should go," She said quietly, pulling on the door latch and opening it.

"Right, yeah," Jonathan said, staring hard at the steering wheel.

"I'll um," Nancy stammered awkwardly, unsure of what to say but feeling like she should say *something*. "I'll see you later,"

Jonathan pursed his lips in a tight smile, barely glancing at her before she got out of the car.

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The air was thick and cold, a clammy atmosphere that would fill your lungs until you couldn't breathe, sputtering and choking on invisible

toxins. Researchers swarmed the area surrounding the lab, their white and yellow coats a stark contrast to the greys and browns of this world.

Scattered throughout this unforgiving landscape, however, were dozens of glowing yellow pods, swollen with the incipient harbingers of the threat to come. As one shook, its movement unbeknownst to the researchers several yards away, its claw tore through the thick membrane of its enclosure until the surface broke and it was set free. Slime oozed from its decimated cocoon as it climbed out on all fours, its long arms dragging on the forest floor like some otherworldly ape. This gangly creature, small but fearsome, stood on wobbly legs as its leathery skin shone with the mucus of its former home. Stretching the petals of its head open for the first time, ready to begin its next stage of life, it stalked through the woods, warily avoiding the sounds of voices in the distance.

It was still too young, too small, for now.

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"And did you think this fool could never win? Well look at me, I'm coming back again..."

[A/N: The plot thickens...]

33. Every Time You Go Away

[A/N: Hey everybody! Thanks for the reviews! I totally don't mind answering questions so please feel free to ask away! To answer a couple:

J: The Demogorgon babies raised in "captivity" would probably be mostly the same as the original. The whole idea is that the lab is trying to replicate the conditions of the Upside Down/the yellow pods in a controlled environment, so it wouldn't die but might be *slightly* different than the ones born in "the wild", so to speak lol Does that make sense?

K: I don't have a Tumblr but I've thought about making one. Should I? lol I go on there once in a while to check up on my fandoms but I don't go frequently and never actually made an account.

Also, side note, I talked to Finn and his friend Josh on Skype last week which was SUPER COOL. I made these Stranger Things Christmas tree ornaments back in December and they loved them ^_^ Both were so, so super nice so that was awesome!

As always, you guys are amazing. Thank you for inspiring me to keep this story going! Motivation has been down a little lately because I'm always so busy but I really appreciate your reviews and encouragement! Please keep letting me know what you think and asking your questions and I'll do my best to deliver :)]

Chapter 33: Every Time You Go Away (by Paul Young)

"If we can solve any problem, then why do we lose so many tears. Oh, and so you go again when the leading man appears..."

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El was beyond exhausted by the time they got back to the house and by the next morning, she barely remembered her sleep-deprived ascent of the staircase. Her tired feet had trudged up the steps one by one as the beginnings of a sunrise peeked through the lace curtains of

the house, illuminating the space.

She finally woke from a dreamless sleep to the sound of her friends' voices downstairs talking to Becky in the mid-afternoon. El groggily rolled over, slowly registering the familiar pitches and tones that clued her in to Gabby and Trish's presence. She could reasonably assume Emma was with them as well but she was generally a quiet person, especially in comparison to her other two friends.

As El listened, the events of the night before registered in her mind. Will's collapse at the dance, the frantic and guilt-ridden drive to the hospital, the agonizing and emotionally draining wait, the immense relief at finding out that Will survived and that he was going to be okay. Not to mention the emotional peaks and troughs she'd gone through with Mike and her own self-directed anger. After such an exhausting night, she hadn't even bothered to change out of her clothes and her pretty purple dress was crumpled and wrinkled from sleeping in it. She'd shucked off her sweater before crawling into bed and it now lay in a heap on the wood floor next to her shoes.

"Let me see if she's up yet," El could hear Becky say downstairs and with a yawn, El tossed her legs over the side of the bed, slowly pulling herself to sitting. She had a headache from the drastic shift to her sleep schedule and her head swam for a second as she stood up and opened her bedroom door the rest of the way to head downstairs.

"Here she comes, actually," Becky said from the base of the stairs.

"Hey El," Her friends greeted as she plopped down the stairs, the hair on one side of her head sticking up comically.

"How's your friend? Will, right?" Trish asked once El was in front of them. "Your aunt was saying you guys were at the hospital all night,"

"Sorry we couldn't stay," Emma said, almost wincing.

El nodded in understanding. "Will's okay,"

"Sheesh, thank goodness," Gabby exhaled. "We felt so bad for leaving you guys last night,"

"What happened to him?" Trish inquired and El hesitated, unsure of

how to answer. She knew it would only be exposing the girls to a difficult, complicated, and potentially dangerous situation if she explained the full extent of Will's condition to them. Thankfully, Trish filled in El's silence. "Did he pass out or something?"

"Uh," El paused. "Yes,"

"Bet you he didn't drink enough water," Gabby hypothesized. "People think just 'cause it's winter, you can't get overheated but packed into a sweaty gym for a dance like that, it's bound to happen,"

El wasn't sure what to say so she offered a small, tired smile.

"Guess we woke you up, huh?" Trish asked, looking El up and down. She had dark circles under her eyes and her gaze was half-lidded with the heaviness of sleep.

"Yes," El replied, yawning. "It's okay,"

"We wanted to see if you wanted to come hang out with us," Gabby explained. "But I guess if you're just waking up you probably wanna get yourself together and stuff?"

El considered this for a second then nodded. "Still sleepy,"

"We get it," Trish nodded. "Don't worry about it. We'll catch up with you later?"

El nodded, smiling. "Later,"

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"I can't believe I have your kidney now," Will marveled as he rested in his hospital bed, his brother at on one side and his mother in a wheelchair on the other.

"Yeah," Joyce smiled, simply relieved that her little boy was safe once again. "Pretty *crazy*, huh?" She grinned playfully.

"Really crazy," Will agreed with a laugh as he reached for the apple juice on the tray by his bed. Lunchtime had long since come and gone and while the food here wasn't any better than the food in the

hospital back home, the nurses had insisted he try and eat as much of his lunch as he could handle. He sat the juice box back down on the tray and rested his head against his pillow.

"They caught that thing that was in your stomach," Jonathan said after a minute. "The doctor told me a couple nurses caught it after it came out of your stomach,"

"Is it still alive?" Will asked, his face contorted.

"No, I think they killed it," Jonathan laughed. "They probably put it in a jar or something; do you want me to ask if you can see it?"

"Uh, no thanks," Will shook his head. "I think I've seen enough of those things,"

"I'm just so happy you're safe," Joyce said, picking up Will's hand and holding it between her own. "Don't you ever scare me like that again," She said in a mock-scolding tone.

"I won't," Will responded sincerely, despite his smile. "I promise,"

"Twice in a year is more than enough, don't ya think?" Jonathan teased good-naturedly.

"I know," Will said with a shrug.

"That was really scary," Joyce said, her tone turning more serious. "If anything would have happened to you, I don't know what I would've done,"

"We were all worried you might not make it," Jonathan added solemnly.

"Wow..." Will breathed. "I just figured with everything going on with the bills and fixing the house and everything that happened back in November, I didn't want to upset you guys," Will admitted with a shrug, looking down at his lap. "I thought I could handle it on my own,"

"Sweetheart," Joyce said, reaching up to tilt his face toward her. "You do not need to worry about our bills, first of all. Okay? I'm sorry if I

gave you any reason to worry about that. We're gonna be fine but you can't do stuff like that - trying to tackle something so huge by yourself... God, you're just as stubborn as your brother," She shot a smirk at Jonathan who raised his eyebrows and shrugged in response. "Don't worry about worrying me, okay? *Tell me* if something's going on with you,"

"Yeah, Will," Jonathan chimed in, grinning. "Mom's tougher than she looks,"

"And don't you forget it," She patted Will's hand for emphasis.

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Jonathan headed back home to Hawkins alone as it got closer to dinnertime. While Will would be in the hospital for at least another week, Joyce was scheduled to go home the following day. The doctors said she'd need between four and six weeks recovery time but after that, she could resume her normal activities. She'd already called her manager at the store who, despite some hesitation, was willing to grant her the time off with sick pay for two weeks of her recovery time. The rest would be an advance she'd have to make up for later.

Jonathan had the radio tuned to his favorite rock station as he flew down the highway on his way back home. It'd be dark out by the time he made it back to Hawkins but for now, the sky was lit with an array of different shades of pink, orange, purple, and blue. As he traveled the now-familiar route, his mind wandered and he found himself thinking of Nancy.

It was only yesterday that he'd kissed her and the red-hot sting of embarrassment was still fresh. They hadn't seen each other or spoken since which, to be fair, wasn't unusual, but it still gave Jonathan more time to chastise himself for his misinterpretation of her feelings toward them. He felt like a complete idiot, torturing himself as the memory of her rejection played over and over in his head. After that night they took a walk and the way she'd comforted him in the hospital, he'd really begun to believe there might be something there. Then again, he'd gotten the same sneaking suspicion when they'd spent time together preparing to fight the Demogorgon, as Will's

friends called it, but once the dust settled, she'd gone back to Steve.

He couldn't be surprised, honestly. Who was he to think someone like Nancy Wheeler would be interested in a guy like him? They were polar opposites. She was perfect - and not in the typical suburban girl kind of way. No, she'd proven that when she fought as his equal alongside the interdimensional monster that had terrorized her and kidnapped his brother. She was beautiful and smart but she was also brave and strong. She could hold her own and he really respected that about her but it was also part of what made it clear to him that she was completely out of his league. What could he offer her anyway? He didn't consider himself particularly good-looking, just average for a guy, and his social ineptitude was a stark contrast to her social butterfly ways. Not only that but his family's financial position did nothing to assuage his lack of confidence. He'd spent his entire life being teased by the kids whose parents had more money. They made fun of his off-brand clothes and called his family trailer trash and eventually, he decided he just didn't like people and if they were going to act like that, he wanted no part in the social dynamics of public school. But Nancy always found a way to pique his interest, even if he kept that interest hidden for most of their lives. Will and Mike had become best friends years ago and as a result, he'd run into Nancy periodically. Just enough to foster a budding crush and nothing more until the events of last November.

She deserved so much more than he could give her and in some part of his mind, he tried to be okay with that. While she'd confided in him before that she didn't want the same cookie-cutter life her parents had, he couldn't completely blame her for going back to Steve. He wasn't actually as bad of a guy as he'd originally thought and it was natural for people to crave and seek stability in their lives. And if there was one thing he hadn't had much of over the course of his own life, it was stability.

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You could call it a hunch. He'd been suspicious of Hopper for some time now but the medical director's spotting of the girl in a hospital in Clarksville confirmed there was something amiss. While he couldn't yet *prove* Hopper's connection to Eleven being seen with Becky Ives, of all people, he was confident that the police chief had

played a role in their little reunion. How else could she have escaped undetected? And who else knew that Eleven was the daughter of Terry Ives but the man who'd used his knowledge as a bargaining chip to gain access to their lab.

Brenner remembered the hospital informant who had once worked under him. He'd been reliable and discreet during his time at the lab and for that and this most recent service, Brenner was grateful. Apparently, the now medical director had just returned from a month long series of medical conferences on the East Coast when heard about a curious case in one of the operating rooms. He was on his way to see for himself when he'd passed Eleven in the halls and immediately recognized her from his time at Hawkins Lab. He'd never worked directly with her so she hadn't recognized him, making it easy for him to pass by unnoticed and hurry off to the surveillance room to get the security tape with her on it.

Now was the time to be more careful than ever, however. The lab had received quite a bit of unwelcome attention following the events in November and while the media frenzy had died down and they'd been able to ward off most accusations, they had to be particularly scrupulous in this case. No detail could be overlooked and carelessness would not be accepted. There were still a few things to figure out but first and foremost, getting Eleven back to Hawkins Lab where she belonged was the priority.

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Flashback

The researchers at the lab had been hesitant to discontinue Sarah's treatment but the last thing they needed was an angry set of parents bringing attention to their facility because they were being met with opposition to the idea of transferring their terminal daughter's treatment elsewhere. After taking Sarah back to the lab to be evaluated after her episode in the park, the doctors had found that the mets in Sarah's brain had grown and were pressing on more areas, mostly affecting her vision. They'd tried another, more aggressive treatment, but the prognosis remained grim. Disturbed by the sudden deterioration, Diane had insisted they go back home and have her resume care with her previous doctors.

Sarah had lost all of her hair after the final treatment at the lab and she was significantly weaker than she'd been before. The heart monitor beside her bed beeped in time with her pulse and Jim sat in bed next to her reading from her Anne of Green Gables book. Diane sat in a chair on the other side, trying her best to keep composure as her daughter listened to the story.

"Well, I don't know," said Matthew," Jim read, his arm wrapped comfortably around Sarah who stared at the pictures in the book, though she could only make out vague shapes and blurred edges. "It just makes me feel glad to be alive...it's such an interesting world."

"Excuse me," Sarah's doctor tapped on the door-frame to draw their attention. "I'm sorry to interrupt but could I speak with you two for a moment?"

"Of course," Diane said, getting up and moving for the door. Jim kissed the side of Sarah's head and followed his wife out as Sarah clutched her stuffed tiger to her chest.

Taking care to move away from the door so as to be out of Sarah's earshot, her doctor met the couple with a sympathetic expression. "We've received the results of Sarah's scans and I'm afraid there's bad news,"

"Oh god," Diane said, pursing her lips and crossing her arms as she looked up to the ceiling.

"The smaller tumors in Sarah's brain that broke off from the original tumor have grown and the tumor in her abdomen has doubled in size, all of which is consistent with the report sent over from Hawkins Laboratory," The doctor explained.

"What does that mean?" Hopper pressed. "What do we do?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hopper, but at this point, the best we can offer Sarah is palliative care," The doctor explained. "Due to the progression of her disease, I'd say she has another month with us, at best,"

Hopper's face blanched. "No, you told us six months before," He said, not realizing he'd begun to raise his voice. "You said she had six months! That still leaves her with another four!"

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Hopper," The doctor's eyebrows stitched together with concern as Hopper ran his hands through his hair. "The tests indicate -"

"Maybe the tests are wrong!" Hopper interrupted, only half-listening at this point as he searched wild-eyed for something to cling to. "Maybe they made a mistake,"

"No, Jim," Diane cut in, her eyes watering. "The only mistake was taking her to that damn laboratory to be experimented on like some kind of lab rat!" She said, her voice equally harsh yet hushed before abruptly heading back into Sarah's room.

As Hopper struggled to process the news, he didn't even process the doctor's statement that he'd be by later to check on them. Instead, he found himself walking down the hall and slipping through a door marked 'Stairs'. He wasn't sure where he was going or why but his feet moved of their own volition. He stopped on the landing, the volatile burning in his chest finally bubbling over and taking his breath away. He grasped the rail and hung his head as hot tear stung his eyes and he clenched his teeth against the pain in his chest. He released his grip on the rail, backing up until his back met the wall and he sunk into it like a comforting embrace. Sliding down to the floor, he collapsed in a heap in the corner and sobbed into his hands. Reality was finally hitting him and the impact felt like the wind being knocked out of him. And what made matters worse, was that he had pushed for Sarah to try the alternative treatment and it had failed. She had less time and it was his fault.

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"Every time you go away you take a piece of me with you. Go on and go free, yeah. Maybe you're too close to see..."

34. Shadows of the Night

Chapter 34: Shadows of the Night (by Pat Benatar)

"We're running with the shadows of the night so baby take my hand, you'll be all right. Surrender all your dreams to me tonight, they'll come true in the end..."

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El had wanted to hang out with the girls later that day but she just felt off. Figuring she was still tired after such an exhausting night, she'd gone back to bed for a while and slept until dinnertime. Becky was downstairs cooking and Terry was in the living room with the TV on as usual. Money had gotten tight lately so Becky had to cut Rose's hours which put more of the burden of Terry's care on her shoulders.

Despite the enticing smell of the pot roast Becky was cooking and not really having eaten anything all day, El's appetite was strangely nonexistent. At Becky's behest, she'd forced herself to eat a reasonable portion before going into the living room to sit with her mother in silence as a rerun of Magnum P.I. played on the screen. She couldn't understand why she felt so tired but nothing seemed overtly wrong and Becky seemed to think it was just because of the tumultuous night they'd had the night before.

El wished she could spend time with Mike and her friends in Hawkins this weekend but it didn't look like that was going to happen considering it was already Saturday night. As she lay in her bed later that evening, having eventually changed into sleep clothes, she didn't even notice that she'd fallen asleep until something woke her in the middle of the night.

The clock by her bed read 3:47 and she had a strange feeling in her belly. Before she could fully wake up, her body lurched forward and she vomited over the side of her bed. Confused and panicked, her eyes welled up with tears. Nothing like that had ever happened before, not like that, and the smell made her feel like it was going to happen again. Sure, she'd thrown up before - usually when people in the lab gave her "medicines" that made her feel terrible. Had someone

given her "medicine" she didn't know about? Who would do such a thing?

Her stomach rumbled as she grabbed the supercom by her bed and ran for the bathroom, tears streaming down her face.

"Mike!" She cried, barely able to focus but her fear and sheer determination to get through to him despite the spinning feeling in her head made it possible to connect. "*Mike...*" She whimpered, anxiety building as she knew she was going to be sick again.

Meanwhile, Mike could vaguely hear the sound of El's voice and it took him a minute to stir from sleep and realize he was in his darkened room and that she wasn't actually there with him. Light from the streetlights outside gave his room a soft white glow and as he gained his bearings, he could hear the desperation and fear in El's voice as his supercom crackled next to his bed.

"El?" A groggy Mike eventually replied as El retched into the toilet. "El, are... are you okay? Over," He asked, a little concerned but also a little grossed out.

"No..." Her voice trembled as tears dripped from her chin and she wiped her mouth, leaning on the toilet seat. Beads of sweat clung to her forehead and her whole body felt like it was shaking. "Sick,"

"Yeah, I can hear it," Mike said, trying to keep from sounding as disgusted as he felt. He had the worst sympathy nausea of anyone he knew. "Did you eat something bad?"

El shook her head instinctively but the motion made her nauseated again and she forced herself to keep from puking which only made the feeling worse. "No," Her voice was breathless, punctuated with desperation and sobs.

"Man..." Mike sighed sympathetically. "I'm sorry. Is Becky around? Maybe she can help you? Over"

"Don't..." El spoke through her cries, her hair now drenched with sweat. "Know... what's wrong,"

"You probably caught something at the hospital, El," Mike reasoned.

"Everybody gets sick this time of year,"

"Caught something?" El parroted, sniffing.

"Yeah, like a bug," He replied and El's panic heightened. Upon hearing her cries intensify, Mike quickly back-tracked. "It's just an expression, El! It's okay! Not like Will. I mean, like... like, people just catch germs. Viruses. They're these little things that we can't see but they make people sick sometimes. It sounds scary but everybody gets them and they go away. You're gonna be okay, just... just calm down, okay? Over,"

El leaned against the wall by the toilet, trying to soak in Mike's explanation. This happens to everyone. Germs. It goes away. Gonna be okay.

"El?" Becky's voice echoing in the bathroom as she popped her head in startled El. "Hey, what's going on?" She took a look at the toilet and the pale, ill look on El's face that told her all she needed to know. "Oh no, you're sick," She looked down at the tired girl with a soft expression, her own face indicative of someone who'd been awakened in the middle of a much-needed sleep.

"Yes," El said in a small, sad voice.

"Is that Becky?" Mike asked through the supercom.

"What are you doing talking on that thing so late?" Becky wondered aloud. "His mom's gonna kill me if she finds out I let you call him this late,"

"It's okay!" Mike piped up. "She won't mind!"

"Yeah, I bet," Becky replied sarcastically. "Come on, sweetheart, let's get you back to bed," El's aunt gestured for her to come with her but El shook her head.

"Can't," The girl said guiltily. "My blankets... Got sick,"

"Okay," Becky sighed, realizing she wasn't going to get much sleep tonight. "I'll get you set up on the couch downstairs so you can get some rest and I'll put your bedding in the wash,"

El considered this for a second before shakily standing up. She wasn't sure if she was going to be sick again or not but she didn't want to think about it too much and find out.

"El, are you still there?" Mike's tired voice crackled through the supercom. "Should I let you go? Over,"

"No," El said emphatically despite a disapproving look from Becky who eventually sighed and gave in. It wasn't worth pushing and if it made her feel better, why not? "Stay. Please,"

"Okay, El," Mike said through a yawn. "I'm here,"

Becky helped El downstairs and dug a couple blankets and pillows out of a linen closet, setting up a comfortable little nest of sorts before retrieving a bucket from the back porch.

"If you need to get sick again during the night," Becky explained, setting the bucket next to the couch. "Just do it in this. You don't even have to get off the couch,"

"Okay," El murmured, pulling the orange crochet blanket over her and clutching her supercom close as Becky went back upstairs to get El's soiled bedding. "Mike?"

"I'm still here," Mike said reassuringly. "Over,"

Fighting against his exhaustion, Mike stayed up with El for another hour, doing his best to ignore the repulsion he felt hearing her throw up a few more times. When the faintest of pink light began to peek through the curtains, signalling the impending sunrise, El finally fell asleep and as a result, disconnected the call.

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It was easier for Jonathan to put Nancy out of his mind, at least for now, while both his brother and mother were in a hospital out of town. He'd told his manager he wouldn't be able to work any of his usual shifts this weekend because of the family's situation and thankfully, he hadn't run into an opposition. By Sunday morning, he was planning on heading up again to bring Will some of his sketchbooks and crayons and a book for his mom. She'd insisted she

didn't need anything since she was being released soon but Jonathan felt the need to take care of them, given that he was currently the only able-bodied member of the household.

Pink Floyd was blaring on the radio as Jonathan busied himself around the house. He'd already cleaned the kitchen and part of the living room yesterday and was working on the bathrooms this morning. He'd always been inclined to help out around the house so that habit was kicked into overdrive considering the fact that Joyce would need some recovery time when she got out of the hospital. Will would still be there for a bit while he healed but Jonathan wanted his mom to come home to a reasonably neat house so that she wouldn't be stressing about that on top of everything else. Growing up, he'd seen his mom experience more than her fair share of stress, even before they had to worry about interdimensional monsters hurting Will, so to the best of his ability, he tried to minimize the burden on her plate.

Elbows deep in scrubbing the bathtub, Jonathan barely picked up on the sound of the kitchen phone ringing over the roar of his stereo. Quickly shucking off a pair of bright yellow cleaning gloves, Jonathan darted into his room to turn the music down and then to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jonathan?"

"Mike?"

"Yeah," Mike said on the other line. "And Dustin and Lucas,"

"Hiiii," The two other boys chorused in the background.

"What's up?" Jonathan said, pushing a stray lock of hair away from his forehead with his wrist. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh yeah, we're fine," Mike said casually. "But we were wondering if you'd give us a ride up to see Will when you go up today. You *are* going up to the hospital today, right?"

"Yeah," Jonathan said, shaking off the momentary confusion and

alarm. It wasn't that unusual for Mike to be calling their house - he *was* one of Will's best friends after all. But given everything that had been happening recently as well as the strange way he lost focus and could get so caught up in his mind trying to *avoid* thinking about Nancy, his head wasn't in its usual place. "Yeah, that's fine. I'm going up around 1; can you guys all be here at the house by then?"

"Oh yeah," Mike agreed. "Totally..." He paused and Jonathan raised an eyebrow at the sudden silence. He could hear Dustin and Lucas' voices in the background gradually getting quieter. "Actually um," Mike finally said in a sheepish tone, just before Jonathan was about to ask if he was still there. "Would you mind making a pit stop somewhere else, too?"

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El had slept through the morning and was curled up in the blankets on the couch watching cartoons. Terry was seated in her usual rocking chair, mindlessly staring at the animated characters on TV as though they were no different than the usual characters she'd watch every day. El hadn't thrown up for several hours so Becky had felt comfortable taking her puke bucket and had been cleaning since she woke up.

El rested her head on the soft pillow at the arm of the couch, her body terribly fatigued though her mind was completely awake. A soft knock at the door startled her and she instinctively sunk down into the couch before curiously lifting her head. The effort made her head swim and throb with pain. Becky had been encouraging her to drink water all morning - something about 'dehydration' - but still, her glass sat half full on the end table, untouched since Becky had first brought it to her an hour ago.

Another knock at the door and El looked out the window to see a car she very vaguely recognized. She couldn't quite see who was at the door but when she looked hard enough, it appeared to be Jonathan in the driver's seat of the vehicle. It had to be her friends! Maybe Mike! El pushed her blankets off of her just as Becky galloped down the stairs, her hair disheveled and haphazardly tied up and tired circles under her eyes as she trotted up to the door.

"No El," She said with a mildly stern look. "Get back under the blankets; you need to rest,"

El pouted slightly but did as she was told, still leaning over to see who might come in the door.

"Hi," El recognized Mike's voice instantly. "Is El around?"

"She is, but -"

"Mike!" El exclaimed with delight.

Before Becky could say otherwise, Mike quickly spoke up, "I just brought her something, to help her feel better," At hearing that, El's ears pricked up with curiosity. He had something for her? "I won't be long, I promise,"

"Okay," Becky sighed and stepped aside. "But be quick; she needs to rest and you don't wanna catch whatever crap she has,"

"Hi El," Mike said, stepping into El's view and only mildly heeding Becky's warning. He had a large pink bowl in his hand but she couldn't see through it and there was a lid covering it as well as something else atop the lid. Mike noticed Terry sitting in her corner, her face blank and her eyes vacant. He wasn't sure how to act around her so he continued as though she wasn't there. "How are you feeling?"

Despite her exhaustion, aches, and pains, El smiled. "Better,"

Her smile was infectious and Mike grinned down at her, suddenly feeling bashful for some reason. "Good; I'm glad," Realizing Becky was still standing there staring at him, he shook his head for clarity. "I um, I brought you this," He lifted the bowl in his hands to gesture. "I told my mom you were sick and she made you soup for when you feel like eating again,"

"Soup?" El parroted. That was something she hadn't had yet.

"Yeah, it's like, mostly liquid but she said that'd be good so you don't get dehydrated,"

Becky shot El an amused but pointed look. "What did I tell you?" She smirked and El looked down at her lap, smiling.

"Yeah," Mike continued. "Um, there's like chicken and noodles and some vegetables, I think. I dunno, it's pretty good," He shrugged, working his way up to the other thing he'd brought for her. "And uh, I also brought you this," He started to balance the large tupperware bowl in one hand but Becky, having noticed the other thing he wanted to give El, quickly scooped the bowl out of his hands.

"How about I put this in the kitchen for when you feel like eating?" She said, taking the bowl and disappearing into the next room.

"Uh, thanks," Mike stammered, a little later than appropriate, as he now stood in front of El with nothing but the hand-made Valentine in his hands. El was trying to get a look at her, her eyebrows stitched together with curiosity as he stood there awkwardly trying to remember what he wanted to say. "So uh," He darted a glance at Terry who still hadn't moved, then took a breath to steady himself. "I um, I made this for you," He said, quickly handing it to her and watching as she studied it closely, touching each edge with care. "It's called a Valentine and I was supposed to give it to you at the dance but I left it in the car by mistake and then with everything that happened, I just forgot and... I dunno, it's just um, something you do on Valentine's Day is make like, little cards or whatever for, um... people..."

"People?" El parroted, a small smile on her lips as she held the heart-shaped card in one hand, her other hand gently grazing the different textures. It was red with a white lace pre-cut heart serving as a second backing layer. The red cardstock had been glued to the lace paper backing and was slightly off-centered. There were sticky gold splotches on the cardstock layer and messy handwriting on the front that she might not have been able to read even if she knew *how* to read such words.

"Yeah, um, people..." Mike said, hesitating as his cheeks began to heat up. "People you... like," He said, his voice ending at a higher pitch than when he'd began.

El smiled. She remembered their conversation in the cafeteria at

school. He'd said the same thing about people you take to cheesy school dances. She remembered her girl friends talking about favorites and crushes and as the gears turned in her mind, Mike stood there awkwardly, desperately wishing she'd say something.

"Like crushing?" El asked honestly, looking up at him with the Valentine still held tenderly in her hand. "Mike," She said seriously. "Do you...*crush* me?"

"Wh-What?" Mike's voice cracked, barely a squeak, as his face felt like it was going to melt off.

A sudden honking outside startled them both, though Mike nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound. Outside, they could see Dustin leaning across the passenger seat and over the steering wheel as Jonathan scolded him and tried to push him back into his own seat.

"I-I -" Mike stammered, watching as Dustin snuck another honk in and gestured impatiently from the car. "Ugh, um..." He patted his hand against his leg anxiously. "I-I've gotta go - we're going up to the hospital to see Will and the guys are *impatiently* waiting," He shot a look through the window and gestured exaggeratedly for the guys to hold on but it was doubtful they could see any of it.

"Okay," El said, mildly disappointed. She didn't want Mike to leave but she also was feeling the need for another nap. "What does it say?" She asked, lifting her Valentine to point it in his direction.

"Oh, uh," Mike said, slowly recovering from the way his heart rate had sped up exponentially as his cheeks approached their normal color. "It says 'Happy Valentine's Day, El'," He read, giving her a sheepish half-smile.

El looked down at the words, now being able to see a little more clearly how the different letters came together to make some of those sounds. "Thank you,"

"No problem," Mike waved her off casually, though to anyone else with more social awareness, he would've looked more than a little awkward. "But yeah, um, I'll talk to you later, okay? I'm sorry, I've gotta go,"

El nodded, still staring fondly at her Valentine. "Promise?" She looked up at him sweetly and it was all he could do to keep his chest from exploding right then and there.

Mike nodded, "Definitely,"

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Much to everyone's surprise, Hopper showed up at the hospital shortly after Jonathan and the boys arrived. As they caught up with Will, laughing and talking, Hopper wheeled Joyce out of the room to chat.

"How's Will?" The police chief asked as he strolled down the hall, pushing Joyce's wheelchair as they went.

"He's doing a lot better," Joyce said, the relief evident in her voice. "His doctors wanna keep him another week to let his stitches heal and keep an eye on everything but they think he's gonna be okay,"

"How about that *thing* they found?" Hopper asked in a hushed tone, looking around the hospital to both maintain a casual appearance and keep an eye out for unwanted attention.

"Oh um," Joyce paused. "I haven't really heard anything else about it,"

"What do you wanna bet Brenner's got people in here that took that thing back to the lab for his little science experiment?" He said with disgust.

Joyce turned in her chair to look up at Hopper as they neared the end of the corridor. "Hop, do you really think they'd be all the way out here?"

"I don't know," Hopper admitted. "I wanna say it's unlikely but with them, you never know,"

"I-I mean, is Will safe here?" Joyce asked, her voice tightening, and he could tell she was getting worried. "I'm supposed to go home tomorrow; I can't just leave him here if -"

"Joyce," Hopper said, stopping the chair and coming around the side

to more easily face her. "Everything's gonna be fine. You, and Will, so you don't need to worry, alright?"

"But -"

"Just *trust me* on this, okay?" Hopper said emphatically, placing his hands on the arms of her wheelchair and forcing her to look straight at him. "I've got my eye on them and if anything happens, I'll handle it,"

"What are you gonna do, Hop?" Joyce challenged. "Sit at Will's bedside day and night? Come on,"

"If that's what I have to do," He replied, just as confidently. "Speaking of which, what time are you being released tomorrow? I want to make sure you get home alright,"

"Oh for heaven's sake," Joyce rolled her eyes, though she was quietly relieved by the offer of protection.

"Don't argue with me on this," Hopper said evenly, maintaining his patience though he always had trouble with the way her stubbornness could match his own.

"I'm not sure but probably sometime after 9," Joyce replied with a sigh. "I still don't feel right leaving Will here with everything going on. What if you're right and someone from the lab knows that *thing* came out of Will? That he's *here*?" She paused, her face blanching. "What if they tried to *take* him, Hop?"

"For god's sake, Joyce," Hopper groaned, his patience waning. "I'm not gonna let that happen. Consider this your protective detail,"

Joyce eyed him, wanting to trust him but also having difficulty letting go of her worry. She'd seen too many things go wrong for her little family and while Hopper had played a huge role in keeping them safe and she had every reason to trust him, that didn't stop her natural instinct to worry about the well-being of her baby.

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It had been a chaotic day at the lab. The oldest of the creatures had

transitioned from its tadpole-like state to fully land-dwelling, escaping its enclosure over night. When the researchers had come in in the morning, they'd found the now one foot tall monster running around the room and wreaking havoc. Glass was shattered on the floor, lights were flickering, papers and trays and other random objects were in disarray as the little monster searched blindly for an escape. They'd managed to capture it and re-home it to a larger enclosure, though not before putting that sector of the lab on lockdown and setting off alarms in the building.

The day had settled into a more predictable routine after the morning's excitement and when the phone desk operators stumbled upon an interesting conversation having occurred only an hour or so prior, they'd called Dr. Brenner down for the good news.

Brenner sat at the desk with headphones over his ears as the operator whose equipment he was borrowing stood by, slowly dragging on her cigarette and waiting with a confident smirk at being the one to have found a lead in the search for the missing girl.

"- *we were wondering if you'd give us a ride up to see Will when you go up today,*" A child's voice said over the recording and Brenner vaguely recognized it.

"*Yeah. Yeah, that's fine,*" An older boy, possibly a teenager replied as cigarette smoke danced around Brenner's head. "*I'm going up around 1; can you guys all be here at the house by then?*"

"*Oh yeah, totally... Actually um, would you mind making a pit stop somewhere else, too?*"

Brenner looked to the operator beside him, the interest mounting on his face.

"*Um, I guess. Where?*"

"*I just wanted to stop by and see El. She was sick last night and my mom made some soup for her. Her house isn't far from the hospital so it wouldn't be too out of the way,*"

The teen sighed good-naturedly. "*Sure, Mike,*"

Brenner listened as the phone clicked, signifying the end of the recording. "When did this happen?"

"Just before noon, I believe," The operator said, leaning forward to butt out her cigarette in the ashtray on the table.

"This is excellent," Brenner said, quite pleased. "We'll get an agent out there and find her in no time," He stood up, buttoning his jacket. "And given what we know about who else is in the area, I believe I know where we can find her,"

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"And now the hands of time are standin' still. Midnight angel, won't you say you will..."

35. She's Like The Wind

Chapter 35: She's Like The Wind (by Patrick Swayze)

"She leads me through moonlight, only to burn me with the sun. She's taken my heart, but she doesn't know what she's done..."

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"Hop, you really don't need to do all this," Joyce said as Hopper escorted her through the front door and over to the armchair in her living room, one arm wrapped around her and encouraging her to lean her weight into him.

"Yeah, I'm just gonna let you hobble all the way from the car and risk falling, sending yourself back to the hospital with some kind of internal bleed," Hopper said sarcastically as she sat down and he let go. "You wonder where your kids get their stubbornness,"

Joyce deadpanned at him, then readjusted herself in the chair, her face tightening slightly with discomfort as she did so. "I'm not on *bedrest*," She insisted under her breath as she favored her incision site and did her best to not let Hopper see her wince. "The doctor said I'm *supposed* to walk around to help heal,"

"Yeah, and that's what you did," Hopper nodded, stepping out of the room and raising his voice to continue communicating. "You walked *with support* to make sure you didn't fall on your ass," He said, returning from the bathroom with a bottle of Tylenol.

"Thank you," Joyce said, taking the bottle from him as he walked into the kitchen, running a glass under the sink and returning to hand her the water. "Look, Hop," Joyce said before popping two pills into her mouth and swallowing down a few gulps of water. "I do appreciate it; I'm just not used to... this sort of... *thing*,"

"Yeah, I know," Hopper nodded, sitting down on the couch adjacent to her. "You've always been that way," He said, casually reclining back against the cushions and looking around at the recently straightened up room. "Well, Jonathan's been busy around here.

Looks good,"

"Yeah," Joyce smiled softly. "He's a good kid,"

"What time's he get out of school?" Hopper asked.

"Um..." Joyce hummed as she thought. "I think around 11-ish? He's part of that... work release program or something, but I'm not sure if he has a shift at the pharmacy today or not,"

"Okay well," Hopper said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees as he faced Joyce. "Here's what I'm thinkin'. I'll stick around here for the next couple hours until he gets home, then I'll drive up and check on Will this afternoon before I head to the lab,"

"Hop, really -"

"Joyce," He said, giving her a pointed look.

"Don't you have work to do at the station?" Joyce asked, not entirely opposed to the idea of him staying for a little while to help but also not really wanted to admit that she needed some help in the first place.

"Oh *yeah*," Hopper said sarcastically as he shook his head. "Look, if anything actually happens, Flo knows to radio me. Otherwise, it's all paperwork and frankly, I don't really keep up on that anyway,"

Joyce gave him a slight look of disapproval but Hopper waved her off. "It's *fine*; Flo's got everything covered. Just relax, alright?"

"Fine," Joyce said, conceding. "I'm not in much of a position to argue, am I?"

Hopper looked her up and down with an amused expression. "Yeah, not really,"

Joyce smirked, deadpanning. "Shut up,"

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El had a hard time paying attention to her friends' chatter; all she

could think about was Gabby's swollen lip and knowing how she probably got it. It was almost painful to have to restrain her powers, and her anger, around her new friends. Part of her wondered what the harm would be in letting them know about her abilities - they didn't need to know about the lab part - but at the same time, she knew that the more people knew, the more it put everyone at risk. The boys knowing and being tangled up in her mess as much as they'd been in the past was more than enough danger for her. Now that Will was looking to *finally* be recovering from his stint in the Upside Down, El was looking forward to what a *normal* life might be like. She didn't have much to compare it to but when she looked at Nancy's pictures on her wall and listened to her girl friends talk about their day to day lives, it made a normal girl's life seem possible.

She was feeling much better since her bout of stomach flu just a couple days ago and Mike had been keeping her posted on Will's status. From what Mike knew, Will was doing well and was supposed to be released from the hospital by Friday. El wanted to visit Will but after "catching a germ" from the hospital, as Mike had put it, she was a bit hesitant to return.

"How often do you have to rehearse?" Emma inquired as El refocused her mind back to the conversation in front of her. They were hanging out at Trish's house since Gabby didn't feel comfortable being at home, for obvious reasons.

"Um, I think it's every weeknight except Friday and then we have a couple dress rehearsals on the Saturdays before opening night," Gabby answered, smiling but calmer than usual. "We're doing a shorter version of the original musical so I think the show dates are at the end of March,"

"I told you you were gonna get in," Trish said with a smirk, plopping down next to Gabby on her bed. "You drive me crazy sometimes but no one's denying you've got a voice," She laughed, turning to Emma who was sitting on the floor skimming through a collection of cassette tapes in an old shoebox marked 'MUSIC' in permanent marker. "Hell, better than I could do, that's for sure!"

"Yeah, thanks," Gabby offered a smile, then sighed. "Man, I really wanted to play Fanny though,"

"Gabby, please," Trish scoffed. "Did you really think Mrs. McGreggor was gonna give the lead to anyone *but* Rebecca Dawson?"

"She gets it every year," Emma piped up, still perusing the tapes. "I think her mom and Mrs. McGreggor are really good friends,"

"Right," Trish nodded, patting Gabby on the back. "I heard they go to the same swim club or something like that. Classic favoritism. It's a bitch but hey, what can ya do?"

"It's still really cool that you're gonna be in the musical," Emma said brightly.

"Yeah," Gabby said, unable to keep from grinning. She was pretty excited. The news of the cast list being posted that morning and her supporting role were the only things keeping her spirits up after her dad's tirade the night before. "El, do you think you'll be able to come to the show? They're all gonna be on weekends and I know you usually go to Hawkins then,"

El wasn't sure what to expect from this show, other than it was something Gabby had wanted to participate in since before they even met. If it meant that much to her, she should go. Mike would understand if she didn't come down for a full weekend. They were actually getting used to the back and forth living situation, even if it wasn't preferred. "Yes," El nodded earnestly. "I'll come,"

"Awesome," Gabby smiled. "You probably wanna come to opening night. It's on a Friday and we'll have the biggest crowd then. And you could head down to Hawkins right after if you wanted,"

"Okay," El agreed, abruptly standing up and walking over to Trish's bedroom door. "Bathroom,"

"Last door on the left," Trish replied automatically then shook her head. "You know where it is,"

"You're not feeling sick again, right?" Emma asked, looking up with a mildly wary expression.

"No," El shook her head. "Pee,"

"Thanks for the report," Gabby laughed, laying back on the bed and reaching for her backpack on the floor to flip through her script for the twentieth time that afternoon.

As El padded down the creaky wooden hallway, she noticed the light in the bathroom was already on. Curious, she stepped forward and pushed on the door to see Trish's mom on the floor by the toilet, her head hung over the bowl in much the same fashion El herself become familiar with less than 48 hours ago.

"Sick?" El asked tentatively from her side of the cracked door, her voice barely audible but the echo in the room helped.

"I'm f-fine, honey," The woman slurred, her words obscured by the hair in her face and the alcohol in her system.

El quietly backed away from the door and trotted back to Trish's room, stopping in the doorway. "Your mom - she's sick,"

"Sick like how?" The girls ceased their chatting and Trish raised an eyebrow.

"Like me," El answered, darting a glance back at the slightly ajar bathroom door. "Throw up,"

"Ugh," Trish groaned, standing up. "She probably just had one too many of her afternoon '*smoothies*'," El backed up as Trish came out of the room. "I'll check on her. You can use the bathroom downstairs,"

Without another word, Trish walked with a heavy gait over to the bathroom door and stepped inside without even knocking. El couldn't hear much from her side of the door but she could tell that what was going on with her mom really bothered Trish. She'd said before that it was because of her mom's drinking. El wasn't sure what '*smoothies*' were but she guessed they had something to do with alcohol, too.

The whole notion of alcohol having that kind of effect on people scared El. Becky drank somewhat regularly, more now that she'd had to cut Rose's hours and more of Terry's care had been left on her shoulders. She'd work a long shift then come home and do everything from cooking dinner to bathing Terry to helping her get from room to

room. While her mother was still locked away somewhere deep inside her consciousness, the connection between her mind and her body was all but completely broken. It was exhausting for Becky to deal with Terry's catatonic state and El could see it in the way Becky's shoulders hung and her eyes drooped with exhaustion. She'd fill herself up on coffee and cigarettes during the day and end the night with a glass or two of whiskey but El had never seen Becky act the way Trish's mom acted. How much was too much? Chief Hopper drank a lot, too. He always had empty beer cans around his trailer, though he'd gotten better about straightening up and putting them all in trash bags before El came over each weekend. At what point did alcohol start hurting someone the way it hurt Trish's mom? Why would someone do that to themselves? El still couldn't understand it. After all the times she's been forced to ingest things in the lab that made her feel strange or sick, she couldn't fathom why someone would do it voluntarily.

.....

Brenner was seated at his office desk with a couple of his highest ranking agents surrounding him as he casually flipped through the file in front of him.

"The girl is living in Clarksville with her aunt and mother, Terry Ives," Agent Carlson, a man in his 30s with a clean blonde comb-over said. "In the file you'll find -"

"I know who they are," Brenner interrupted in a steady yet authoritative voice. "Ah yes," He said, allowing the memory to drift through his mind like a puff of smoke. "I'm very familiar with the Ives family, thank you,"

"Sir," Kramer, the agent supervising Hopper, stood with crossed arms over his navy blue suit. "We have the information we need to retrieve the girl. The aunt works during the day throughout the week and the mother is a vegetable. We can easily pick her up while maintaining a low-profile,"

"No," Brenner breathed after a brief pause. "We need to handle things much more carefully this time,"

"Sir?" Agent Kramer inquired.

"We lost too many men in our last attempt," Brenner explained. "And with our recent discovery, we can't risk the publicity or any additional loss in manpower. Getting Eleven back is priority but if we are sloppy, she could escape again," He said, tapping thoughtfully at his chin as his brow furrowed. "We must tread lightly for now. I'd still like to see how much Mr. James Hopper knows about the situation. How has his work been lately?"

"No change," Kramer reported. "Our expeditions have primarily centered around collecting samples to support the development of the creature lab. He hasn't indicated any leads regarding finding the girl,"

"Any suspicious activity you've noticed?"

"No sir," The agent shook his head. "Nothing outside of what is to be expected,"

"You see," Brenner said, standing up. "I don't quite believe that. He must have played some sort of role in Eleven's reappearance in Clarksville," Unsure of what to say, the agents remained silent, obediently listening.

"Have your men investigate the police chief's involvement," Dr Brenner instructed. "In the meantime, we need to act before they move her to another location,"

"Should I send a car up?" Agent Carlson asked.

"Not yet, son," Dr. Brenner shook his head, an idea forming in his mind.

.....

Jonathan leaned lazily on the countertop at Hawkins Pharmacy, his starched blue vest bunching up as he did so. It was usually slow this time of day and he hadn't seen a customer in the better part of an hour. After school he'd gone home to check on his mom and was interested to see Hopper still there. While it didn't surprise him completely, it was still odd seeing another man taking care of his mom. The chief had said he was going to head up to Clarksville that

afternoon to check in on Will and would call with an update. Jonathan had made sure his mom was set up with everything she would need while he was at work. It wasn't a long shift but he'd be a little late getting home to make dinner. Of course she'd insisted it wasn't a big deal and he shouldn't call out because of her, especially after having missed so much time already. Still, he felt a little guilty not being home, just in case.

As the mid-afternoon dragged on, Jonathan wished it would get busier. That at least would help him to stay out of his head and avoid stewing in his thoughts. The memory of seeing Nancy that morning was still etched into his corneas. He'd always been able to ignore the burning in the pit of his chest when he saw her but after everything that'd happened in such a short amount of time, that sensation had only intensified. From a smolder to an all-out inferno, he felt like he would melt from the inside out when he saw her. Her wavy brown hair falling gracefully over her shoulders like something of fairytales, her big blue doe eyes that somehow managed to hide the fierce woman within.

She'd been just down the hall from him, retrieving a few books from her locker before first bell, and he'd tossed and turned in his mind at the thought of going up and talking to her. About what? He didn't know. Everything he came up with seemed stupid as soon as he thought of it. After everything they'd been through together, why was this so difficult? A simple conversation? A hello? *Anything*. It was driving him crazy.

But before he could convince himself to approach her, Steve had walked up to her. Jonathan's eyes narrowed without even trying and the burning sensation in his chest felt like it would consume him alive. He watched as Steve draped an arm over Nancy's head, leaning against the lockers as he spoke to her. He couldn't see Nancy's face or hear her reaction but he'd seen enough. How could he be so stupid to think anything would change? What made him think he had any chance at being with someone like her? So their brothers were best friends and they'd known each other for years - big deal. That didn't mean anything. She was just shy of perfect and he was a social leper that was barely a step above trailer trash. He'd heard it enough times over the years to know what his peers whispered about him behind

his back. What could he ever truly offer her in the grand scheme of things?

The sound of bells chiming above the front door broke Jonathan from his thoughts and he watched as Steve walked in with his friend Dave. They were talking about something and Steve seemed notably more subdued than his friend as they walked lazily through the aisles, picking up random snacks along the way.

Jonathan fought with himself to act normal and not let his thoughts about Nancy affect his interaction with Steve. After facing off against the monster together, they'd developed something of a mutual understanding or respect for one another, to use the terms loosely. They were okay. Steve didn't bother him and Jonathan concealed his bitterness toward the guy dating the girl he was... interested in. They weren't exactly friends but whatever they were was better than before, even if they never talked.

"Hey Byers," Steve greeted in a polite, almost monotone voice, setting his snacks on the counter as Dave came up behind him.

"So what do you and Ms. Princess have planned?" Dave inquired mischievously.

"I dunno, man," Steve said, turning to speak to Dave through gritted teeth before facing Jonathan again. "Just these, thanks," He turned and muttered something inaudible to Dave who only snickered. As Jonathan scanned the bags, Dave guffawed, pulling something off the shelf by the counter. "Here, throw these in for my man here,"

Jonathan stared at the box of condoms Dave had tossed unceremoniously onto the counter and he fought to keep his face from giving away the combination of anger and jealousy that had welled up in him like an active volcano.

"Dude, cut the shit," Steve said in an unamused tone, returning the condoms to the shelf. "You're not funny,"

"Yeah, whatever," Dave rolled his eyes as he dropped several bags of chips and a Gatorade on the counter as Jonathan kept quiet. He felt as though his feelings for Nancy were written across his chest and

that the most subtle misstep could draw unwanted attention.

When the two teens finally left, Jonathan let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, allowing the scowl that had been building up to finally become evident on his face. As if he needed any further confirmation that nothing was going to happen between him and Nancy. She obviously hadn't broken up with Steve if he and his friends were still cracking jokes like that. He was an idiot to think anything would change.

.....

"Feel her breath in my face, her body close to me. Can't look in her eyes, she's out of my league... Just a fool to believe I have anything she needs..."

.....

[A/N: Thanks for reading! Please leave a review and let me know what you think so far! We're heading into the climax (which will likely span several chapters XD) so yay! What do you think is gonna happen? Who do you want to see more of? What questions do you have? Let me know!]

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36. Dreams

[A/N: Thank you so much for reading/reviewing/favoriting/following! Please keep doing it! ;)]

Chapter 36: Dreams (by Fleetwood Mac)

"Now here you go again, you say you want your freedom. Well who am I to keep you down? It's only right that you should play the way you feel it..."

.....

Earlier Monday Morning

She'd spent the weekend avoiding him but she'd known as soon as she got to school, he'd find a way to talk to her. She'd needed the time to think, to figure out exactly how she was going to handle this situation. It was getting to a point where she couldn't ignore the way her skin tingled when she was around Jonathan or the way her heart seemed to jump in her chest when their eyes locked. There was something electric there and the more she tried to fight it or ignore it, the more powerful it became when he was nearby.

Also, she was still technically *with Steve* and she was definitely not the type of girl to be with two guys at once. ...Was she really thinking about *being* with Jonathan? The idea sent a shiver of nervousness and excitement up her spine.

But she needed to figure out what to do about Steve. If she was honest with herself, she'd been growing apart from Steve steadily ever since November. Her affection for him had spiked and gradually dissipated but she liked having someone to be around, someone who cared about her, even if she didn't look at him the same way anymore. Before Steve, Nancy would spend most of her free time on the phone or hanging out with Barb. While she was well-liked at school, she didn't really have many strong relationships with her peers. She spent a lot of time studying and she tended to blend into the background against some of the more prominent, popular personalities at her school. Barb hadn't cared about any of that and

actually encouraged Nancy's studious nature. They'd bonded years ago and it'd been one of those friendships that just stuck. Maybe because of their shared interests and perspectives. Maybe because other people didn't notice them much. Either way, Steve's sudden interest in her had not only thrown her for a loop but it had been new, fresh... *exciting*.

Now with Barb gone, who did she have if she didn't have Steve? Who would call her out of the blue just to check in? Who would she hang out with on the weekends or eat lunch with at school? The idea of being alone terrified her, now more than ever.

But she didn't really *have* Steve. She kept him at arm's length emotionally and she knew that even if she really opened up, he wouldn't *get it*. Especially since there were some things about everything that happened that she just couldn't talk about. Like how and why she knew Barb was dead in the first place. It wasn't like Steve was a bad guy or anything. She couldn't certainly admit his faults and his mistakes but she knew he had a good heart. It says a lot about a person for them to come back and risk their lives fighting a monster when they could have easily escaped unscathed. But was that enough to sustain a relationship that had become notably surface-level and unfulfilling?

Jonathan understood though. He'd been through this ordeal with her and while Will was alive, he had the best understanding out of any of them as to how she was feeling about Barb. They'd both been taken by that monster. They'd both been trapped in the Upside Down. The only difference being that Will managed to survive and Barb...

Why did everything have to be so difficult? So complicated? She'd thought the minor annoyances of teenage life had been something until her entire world came apart at the seams. There was a time when the worst thing that could happen to her in a given day was Mike being as asshole at breakfast or getting detention for passing notes with Barb. How had so much changed over just a few months? How had *she* changed so much? She didn't want to hurt anyone...

The sudden presence of an arm over her head startled her out of her thoughts and she reflexively jumped.

"Jeez Nance," Steve said, looking down at her with a mixture of concern and confusion. "You okay? I've been trying to reach you all weekend but your mom said you were busy?"

"Oh..." Nancy said. "Yeah, um, I've just... got this research paper for Brofman that's been killing me..."

"Bummer," Steve said sympathetically. "Anyway, look, I just wanted to apologize for how I acted at the dance. I was a total ass and it just wasn't cool..."

Nancy's mouth curved in a small, tight smile. "Thanks,"

"So we're okay?" Steve asked, tilting his head and giving her that half-smile that always brought out the dimple in his cheek.

Nancy took a deep, subtle breath and exhaled. "Sure, yeah, we're okay," She said hesitantly, almost losing her nerve. "Actually can we uh, maybe we can talk after school? Take a walk or something?"

Steve furrowed his brow slightly. "You're sure everything's okay? 'Cause if you're still pissed at me, I totally get it,"

"No, I'm not mad," Nancy said honestly. "Just... meet me by the office after the last bell, okay?"

"Okay..." Steve said with mild apprehension as the first bell rang throughout the hall. "I'll see you later, Nancy," He said, giving her a peck on the forehead before heading off down the hall.

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Flashback

Time is an elusive concept. In quieter times it seems to pass with the lackadaisical effort of a tortoise yet when it is needed, coveted, it slips through your hand like grains of sand on a beach.

The weeks passed so quickly and Hopper could barely comprehend how his once vibrant little girl had deteriorated into the sunken form he saw before him. He'd spent just about every night at the hospital, unwilling to leave her side and risk the possibility of anything happening and him not

being there with her.

He and Diane were barely speaking, neither of them ready to discuss the trajectory Sarah had taken as both of them grieved internally, in their own ways. He'd let her take the lounge chair at night and he'd sit on the floor, propping himself up against the wall when the call of sleep became too strong. Sarah was spending less and less time awake these days but the steady beep of the heart monitor was a reassuring reminder that his little girl was still there.

It was almost dawn when an erratic, high-pitched beeping noise and the sound of his wife frantically calling his name stirred him from sleep and he jumped up almost immediately.

"What? What's happening?!" He said as the sleep fell away from his eyes and a slew of doctors and nurses rushed into the room.

"No! My baby!" Diane cried out, her face crumpled as a nurse guided her away from her daughter's bed. "No!"

The hospital staff surrounded her, checking vitals and administering CPR to their seemingly sleeping child.

"Blood pressure keeps dropping," A nurse said as Hopper gathered Diane in his arms, both of them standing back at the foot of the bed as they watched the inevitable. "Her pulse ox is falling,"

Hopper could feel Diane's tears soaking through his shirt and he fought to keep himself together, to be the man she needed, even though his legs felt like they could give out at any moment and his face felt like it was twitching from the force it took to keep from completely losing it.

The incessant, fast-paced beeps coming from Sarah's EKG monitor suddenly melded into one long, steady beep as the peaks and troughs on the monitor came together in a single line.

"Flatlining!" A nurse said and the world felt like it was spinning. Everything felt far away and nothing felt real. Hopper realized he was clinging to Diane just as tightly as she was holding onto him. He could feel her shoulders shaking as sobs overtook her but it was strange. Almost muted. He'd watched the doctors pound on his daughter's chest,

desperately trying to revive her, but she never woke up. She never opened her eyes. And she never would again.

He jumped when Diane wiped his face and he only then realized he was crying. The doctors and nurses looked at them with sympathy, whispering their words of apologies as they quietly left the room to give the grieving parents some privacy. But Hopper barely heard them. Their murmured words of condolences were like distant echoes and all he could hear was the loud, piercing, steady beep of the EKG ringing in his ears.

.....

All he could hear was that damned beeping, a sound that haunted him since his daughter's death just as the memory that plagued his dreams. As he gradually woke up, he could still see his daughter in that hospital bed almost as vividly as the day it'd happened.

The beeping of Sarah's EKG morphed into the shrill call of his phone in the next room and when he looked at the clock on his bedside table, he already knew it was Flo calling to tell him he was *very* late. More than usual. These long days and late nights were draining him but what choice did he have? He had to keep going.

.....

El spent much of the remainder of Monday afternoon at Trish's hanging out and watching music videos on MTV until she needed to get home for dinner. The clouds outside were growing thicker, threatening the impending rain. The girls lazily chatted as they watched the a Culture Club music video on the small TV in the corner of Trish's room.

"So..." Trish said after a moment of silence. "I've gotta ask, Gabby. What was up with you and that kid Dalton?"

"Who?" Gabby sat up, looking at her with a confused expression.

"Dustin," El corrected quietly.

"Crap, yeah," Trish said, snapping and pointing. "Sorry, *Dustin*, I mean," She gave Gabby a pointed look. "I totally spaced on asking you about it over the weekend but you guys were *kind of* talking a lot

at the dance..."

"No we weren't," Gabby denied adamantly. "I don't know what you're talking about,"

"Pfft," Trish scoffed. "Yeah right, your face totally gives you away, you know that right?"

"Whatever, Trish," Gabby rolled her eyes, intently turning her attention back to the TV.

"That's the one!" Trish pointed and laughed. "That whole 'deer-in-the-headlights-thinly-veiled-ignorance' face. Nevermind the *googly-eyes* you had on Friday night,"

"There were *no googly-eyes!*" Gabby defended.

"They sang together," El piped up with a small smirk.

"El!" Gabby exclaimed. "Ugh! Traitor!"

For a second, El felt a pang in her chest. She'd been called a traitor before and it wasn't a nice thing. She cast her head down, scrutinizing her statement and wondering about her mistake.

"Relax, El," Trish said, patting her on the shoulder and El looked up. "It's not a big deal and Gabby's just being *defensive*," She said with a devilish grin. "So, what's this about *singing*?"

"Will told me they were singing 'Bohemian Rhapsody' along to the radio in the car," Emma chimed in and shrugged at Gabby who gave her an incredulous look. "Oh come on, Gabby, after all the teasing you and Trish have dumped on me for liking *Josh*?"

Trish simply chuckled in amusement. "I am loving this," She said with sigh of contentment. "I can see it now, the tortured romance of a long-distance relationship,"

"*Oh my god*," Gabby groaned. "You're so full of it, Trish. Besides, why aren't we focusing on El? She's the one who's *actually* in a long-distance relationship with *Mike*,"

"Hmm, you may have a point," Trish said, tapping her finger to her chin and wiggling her eyebrows. "They were *awfully* cute and snuggly at the dance but that's also not a surprise. How *is* everything with your leading man, El?"

El scrunched her eyebrows, not understanding the term but understanding that she was at least asking about Mike.

"He brought me soup," She said, after thinking a moment. "But no crush,"

"Ha!" Trish guffawed. "Yeah, right. *No crush*. Like we're gonna believe *that!*"

El shook her head. "I asked. He didn't say,"

"You *asked?*!" Gabby asked, her eyes wide and mouth agape. "Are you serious?"

"That takes some balls," Trish commented, impressed.

"What did he say exactly?" Emma inquired.

El shook her head again. "Nothing,"

"I don't buy it," Trish rolled her eyes. "He so obviously is completely into you,"

"You probably caught him off-guard," Emma said. "Did he look surprised or scared, maybe?"

El considered this for a moment. He had looked a little bit like he did when the Demogorgon came into the classroom.

"Pale," She answered. "Scared,"

"Well, first off," Trish said confidently. "I hate to break it to you but that boy is as pale as Emma's mom's lace curtains on a *regular* day. As for being '*scared*', I *bet* he was if you just blew his secret wide open like that!"

El mulled over this for a bit. She couldn't tell if it was a good or bad

thing that she'd asked Mike about having a crush. She didn't think it was something to be afraid of... it was a good thing, wasn't it? Liking someone a lot? Being someone's favorite or *having* a favorite? But she didn't want to scare Mike so maybe it was best not to bring it up again. She didn't want to upset him. Still, it made her chest feel heavy to think that she might not be Mike's favorite the same way he was hers. Even if her friends disagreed, why would Mike lie? Friends didn't lie and at least to her, she was pretty sure he was more than just a regular friend. That had to make the truth even *more* important.

.....

The school cafeteria was full to bursting at lunch time. By the middle of the week, a heavy series of storms had settled over Hawkins and everyone had to cram into the cafeteria as opposed to being able to eat lunch outside. Even despite the time of year, plenty of students preferred to hang out in the courtyard during lunch just to get away from the crowd. With the perpetual thunderstorms that had been present since Monday night, that option was no longer on the table unless students wants to sit in wet puddles on the benches or stand in the rain.

Mike could barely hear Dustin and Lucas talking over the roar of the crowd in the cafeteria but that didn't make much difference because he wasn't really paying attention anyway. He couldn't stop thinking about what El had said last time he saw her. She actually *asked* him if he had a crush on her. Just remembering the encounter was enough to clam him up and make him feel like a bumbling idiot. How did she even know what a 'crush' was? Or maybe she actually didn't and she'd heard it somewhere, misunderstood it, and then was asking him about it? His mind was racing faster than he could keep up with it even though it'd literally been days. He obviously had told Dustin and Lucas because a) he didn't want to deal with their teasing and b) they would've given him so much crap for not answering.

It was beginning to feel weird that he hadn't talked to her in days. It wasn't that he hadn't *wanted* to but he couldn't exactly get in contact with her unless she called him by supercom or he called her on the phone. He usually didn't have to call her himself because she'd use her powers at least once a day and they'd chat over their supercoms.

But she hadn't called him... granted, yeah, she'd been sick over the weekend and was probably recovering but what about the first half of this week? Shouldn't she have called by now? Unless she was mad at him. She hadn't *seemed* mad when he saw her, just disappointed... ugh... The guilt and anxiety was gnawing at Mike's stomach and completely ruining his appetite.

Maybe he should call her today after school. Just to make sure she wasn't mad at him. But then again, if she was, was he ready for her? He felt like a doofus for not responding to her question but now, that feeling had only snowballed into an intense fear that she wouldn't want anything to do with him anymore. She was obviously learning new things, new terms, and had new friends, all without him. Maybe she didn't really need him anymore? He didn't want to think about that. He had to talk to her and make sure everything was okay but what if she asked again? What if he screwed up all over again? He had to be honest with her. That's what friends did and she was definitely more than just his friend.

"Hello?!" Dustin waved his hand in front of Mike's spaced out face. "Dude, there's five minutes left in lunch,"

"What's with you?" Lucas asked, scooping a piece of fruit out of his fruit cup.

"N-Nothing," Mike said, snapping out of it and looking down at the untouched slice of pizza on his tray. "I just... didn't get a lot of sleep,"

"Mhm," Dustin said, one eyebrow quirked in suspicion. "Whatever, man,"

"Anyway," Lucas said, sipping the remaining juice out of his fruit cup and dropping the plastic container on his tray. "Will's supposed to come home tomorrow,"

"I thought he was coming home Friday?" Mike asked.

"Apparently he's doing really well and they're letting him out early," Dustin shrugged, half-heartedly scooping red jello out of a plastic cup as he shook his head in dismay. "Man, I should've gone back for the chocolate pudding after El killed the Demogorgon," He stabbed the

gelatin with his spork. "Same shit, different day, Phyllis!" He said loudly, tossing the half-eaten cup onto his tray, his voice lost in the sea of conversations in the cafeteria.

Mike and Lucas rolled their eyes at their friend's outburst as staff began dismissing tables to head back to class.

"Hey, check out who just walked by without saying a *damn* thing," Lucas said, nodding toward Troy and James who were passing their table on the way to the trash cans.

"El really did a number on them," Dustin laughed as the three watched the two bullies dump their trays in the trash and leave the cafeteria. "I thought it'd been pretty quiet around here lately,"

While it was true that Troy and James had been keeping their distance from them ever since the day El came to school, Mike couldn't help but wonder how long their avoidance would last. After El broke Troy's arm, it hadn't taken too long for them to go back to making him and his friends' lives as miserable as possible. He couldn't have known that El was missing or that she was in the Upside Down so their fear of El and what she could do was relatively short-lived. Still, it made sense to enjoy the reprieve while they could.

"That's us," Dustin said, grabbing his trash and stepping out of the lunch bench as an administrator called their table number. As the trio left walked out, weaving through throngs of classmates entering and exiting the cafeteria, Mike found it easy to drift back into his inner world. He wasn't sure how exactly he would start his conversation with El but he had the rest of the school day to work up the courage to call her and tell her how he really felt.

.....

It wasn't that late in the evening but the storm, coupled with the shorter days of winter, made everything dark. Light from lamp posts along the road bounced and reflected off the puddles in the pavement. The roads were relatively clear post-rush hour but this particular sect of road, this particular patch of woods, this particular dip in the earth that was offset from the road... it wasn't well populated during even its busiest hour.

She'd been out for a quick grocery run. Just some essentials to last until the weekend when she'd go on a more substantial trip. Her sister was supposed to be with her. She was supposed to have a doctor appointment. The one late day that the doctor offered evening appointments. The one day that fit best with her work schedule. But at the last minute, the office had called to say the doctor needed to cancel. She had been planning on being out anyway, why not pick up the milk? The bread? El's Eggos that always seemed to disappear almost as soon as she got them home?

The rain outside roared like a pride of lions, obscuring the view through the windows as the engine sputtered and croaked until it died.

Somewhere in the distance, red and blue lights flashed and a siren screamed, racing to the scene described by a good Samaritan on the side of the road. But they were already too late.

.

"But listen carefully to the sound of your loneliness; like a heartbeat drives you mad, in the stillness of remembering what you had and what you lost, and what you had, and what you lost..."

37. Hysteria

[A/N: What's this? Another chapter in less than a week?! Booya! XD I'm so excited we're approaching the climax! ISH GOIN' DOWN!]

Please review :)]

Chapter 37: Hysteria (Def Leppard)

"Out of touch, out of reach, you could try to get closer to me. I'm in luck, I'm in deep..."

.....

Two Days Ago - Monday Afternoon

Nancy waited by the main office, her heart thumping in her chest as hundreds of other students swarmed past her, eager to make it to the bus or just get out of the building and go home. This was finally happening. It was actually happening. Not in the heat of the moment or through her ghosting herself. She was really about to break up with Steve and while she knew it was the right thing to do, she was also terrified. She didn't want to hurt him but she knew that that was going to happen regardless of how much she wished it away. She wondered briefly if they'd still be friends, then scoffed at herself for it. He was probably going to hate her, especially if she started dating Jonathan right away. Maybe she'd become a social outcast and Steve and his friends would spread awful rumors about her.

She couldn't think like that. She wasn't doing anything wrong. She was being honest with herself and with Steve. Maybe he wouldn't be angry or vengeful like that time he and his other friends spray painted the movie theatre. Maybe he'd just be upset. The image of Steve breaking down in front of her alarmed her and she wondered if she'd be able to handle that alternative. No, Steve wasn't a fall-apart-at-the-seams type of person. Right? They'd only been dating for a few months but she thought she had a pretty good understanding of him at that point. Then again, she'd known Jonathan for years and didn't really *get* him until now so...

And people change. She certainly had. Experiences change people and their priorities and opinions shift. If anyone could attest to that, it would be her. She was certainly not the same person she'd been at the beginning of the school year and they were barely into third quarter.

Another thought worried her, though. What if she went through with this, breaking up with Steve, and then her and Jonathan didn't work out? Or maybe they realized they weren't actually on the same page? Then she'd really be completely alone...

She could spot Steve's voluminous hair from the other end of the hallway and when he saw her waiting by the office door, he smiled. Nancy felt her muscles tense as Steve approached and she winced when he put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her cheek. This was not going to be easy but it had to be done. Caring about someone and being a good person isn't enough of a reason to be in a relationship with someone that you just don't click with anymore. That became painfully obvious the moment Jonathan had kissed her in the car.

"Hey," Steve said and Nancy forced herself to give a small smile.

"Hey," She said softly, looking around as the crowds surrounding them gradually began to dwindle. "Maybe we can go somewhere quiet to chat?"

Steve's face gave it away. He was worried but he didn't press on it. "Okay," He said simply, leading her outside and around to a less-traveled side of the building. There were a few people passing by as they walked home but they were out of earshot and the bike rack on this side only had one bike latched to it.

"So..." Steve breathed. "What's up?"

Nancy inhaled deeply, exhaling through her nose in a quiet sigh. Waves of long brown hair fell in front of her face as her gaze fell to the ground, her hesitation telling him more than her words.

"You're still pissed about the dance," Steve surmised and Nancy looked up.

"No, it-it's not that..." She shook her head. "Well, it kind of is but... but not really,"

"Then what?" Steve asked, approaching her with his hand outstretched to touch her but the way she backed away caused a sharp sting to his chest. "Nance... come on..."

"I just..." Nancy started, words buzzing around in her head that somehow just weren't making it to her mouth. "I just... Steve, I-I think we're over,"

His face blanched and his eyes widened. "What do you mean you *think* we're over?"

"I mean, we..." She trailed off, trying to find the right way to say it but nothing seemed right. "Things just aren't the same, Steve,"

"Well, yeah, I know *that* but that's okay! We've been dealing with it," He said, desperate to change her mind, to reverse the course of this conversation. "Look, I know I've been an ass and I know you've been going through a lot. I should've been more understanding but Nancy... that doesn't mean -"

"It does," Nancy interrupted. "I'm sorry. Look, I... I really appreciate you being there and... trying, after everything that happened. But we can't go back and things are different now,"

"But Nance, nothing's different!" Steve countered, almost pleading. "And I mean, even-even if it is, it can get better. Things can go back to normal,"

Nancy shook her head. The way he was looking at her was pulling at her heart and making her want to back out of this whole conversation. He looked frightened, worried, desperate... She felt her eyes watering and blinked her tears away.

"They will never go back to normal," Nancy said quietly, hanging her head with her arms crossed over her chest. "This is the new normal,"

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Present Day - Wednesday evening

Jonathan had worked all afternoon, watching as the sky became darker and darker, ominous clouds rolling in and threatening a complete downpour. The weatherman had been talking about a series of thunderstorms that would be rolling through a large stretch of Indiana for the majority of the week and it was looking like they were about to hit Hawkins. Barren tree branches and discarded trash fluttered around outside, dancing along the road and the sidewalk as the wind picked it up and tossed it about.

After counting his drawer and cleaning up, Jonathan was ready to head home in the hopes of getting there before the rain actually started. With his boss in the back finishing up the closing procedures, Jonathan tossed his backpack over one shoulder and his camera bag over the other before heading outside. He had just finished locking the glass door when a voice behind him surprised him.

"Hey,"

Jonathan spun around to see Nancy standing on the sidewalk, her brown locks waving wildly in the wind.

"What are you doing here?" He asked, almost muttering as he turned back to the door, pulling his key out and reluctantly turning to face her. "Shouldn't you be on a date or something with Steve?"

He didn't give her the chance to respond before stepping off the curb and walking over to the driver's side door of his car.

"No, I -" Nancy said emphatically, following him. "I... wanted to talk to you. I've been trying to catch you since Monday, actually. Your mom said you'd be here,"

Thunder clapped above them and the sky began to spit. "I've gotta get home," Jonathan mumbled, yanking open his door and reaching around to unlock the backseat.

"Jonathan -"

"Look," He said, tossing his bags into the back and closing the door. "I get it. I screwed up and I..." He groaned in embarrassment. "Just forget it, okay?"

Suddenly, the sky seemed to open up and rain began to fall hard and fast, pelting the roof of the car and drenching them in seconds. Without a word, Jonathan jumped in the car as Nancy shrieked from the other side, "Open the door! Open the door!"

Jonathan leaned over the passenger seat to unlock the door and Nancy frantically scrambled inside, shivering as she slammed it shut and raindrops dripped down the side of her face.

Jonathan sat quietly, his hands on the steering wheel as water dripped from his bangs. He hadn't wanted to have this conversation. He wasn't ready for it. But he couldn't leave her out there in the rain and now he was trapped.

He could see Nancy shivering, her jacket partially soaked and her hair completely saturated. "There's a uh," He said, reaching around to the back and stretching to get to a throw blanket on the floor. "This," He straightened himself back out, ignoring how much closer he had been to her for those few seconds, as he pulled the dark brown blanket up to the front seat. "Here," He offered it to her and she quickly shrugged off her jacket, wrapping herself in the dry, soft blanket. As her shivering ceased, she looked back over at the boy beside her. He was adamantly avoiding her gaze - looking at the steering wheel, out the window. Anywhere but at her.

"I haven't seen you around much lately," She said quietly, the rain outside roaring and pounding against the windows as the thunder continued to roll. They couldn't even see out of the windows anymore; the downpour had turned their view into a misty grey fog.

"Yeah, I've been busy, um," He replied, pursing his lips. "You know, with mom and Will, school, and work..." He neglected to mention that he'd specifically picked up extra shifts to avoid her. To keep his mind off of the sting of rejection.

"Yeah," Nancy said, her stomach a bundle of nerves though she couldn't understand why. This should be the easy part but the excitement and anticipation, the nerve-wracking anxiety of not knowing what could happen... it was all swirling around inside her like a whirlwind more intense than the storm outside. "I broke up with Steve,"

This got Jonathan's attention and he turned to look at her, his eyebrows raised. "You did?"

Nancy pursed her lips, nodding.

"But he and Dave were just in the store earlier," Jonathan said, trying to make sense of what she was telling him. "Dave was talking about some date you and Steve had," He did his best to keep from sneering and purposefully left out the part about Dave tossing condoms on the counter.

"Dave's a neanderthal," Nancy said with disdain. "I talked to Steve after school," She shrugged. "It's over... it's been over for a while now, I think..."

"Oh," Jonathan said, unsure what to make of this as his heart began to pound in his chest. His nerves danced up and down his arms and every time he looked at her he felt that familiar burning in his chest. That magnetic pull that sometimes made him act outside of his better judgment.

"Yeah..." Nancy said, pulling the blanket up farther around her shoulders and turning a little more in her seat to face him. "I um..." She looked down at her lap, pushing herself to tell him but as the words bubbled up inside her, the heat to her cheeks intensified. "I guess there were just some things going on that I couldn't ignore anymore,"

Jonathan didn't notice that his mouth was slightly agape, hanging on her every word. "O-Oh," He said, his voice cracking in a way it hadn't since he'd first entered puberty. "Yeah," He said in his normal tone, nodding dumbly. This couldn't actually be happening. The last thing he wanted was to misread a signal and humiliate himself all over again.

"You know," Nancy said, still looking down. "It's kind of funny that we're in your car again. This is the same spot we were sitting in last time..." She let herself trail off, looking up at him and hoping he understood what she was alluding to.

The expectant, hopeful look in her eyes ignited the burning in

Jonathan's chest into a full blaze. She was talking about their kiss. She wasn't with Steve anymore. All of the signs were pointing to one thing and the billowing cloud of doubt in his mind was becoming quieter with every passing moment. "Yeah," He nodded, still holding back until a brief rush of boldness filled his veins with adrenaline. "There's something about you -" He cut himself off, his doubt resurfacing and keeping him from taking one step too far.

"What about me?" Nancy pressed, leaning only slightly closer but he noticed.

"Um," He cleared his throat, spurred on by her prodding. "Sitting there... with the rain and..." He trailed off but the way she was looking at him kept him going. He couldn't just leave it there, not with the way she was silently pressing him to say the words that danced on the tip of his tongue. "I could kiss you," He murmured, almost inaudible but their proximity made it impossible for her not to hear. Jonathan could feel his heartbeat in his ears, the pounding in his chest almost unbearable as he waited in agony for her to say something.

"Why don't you?" Nancy asked quietly and it only took a beat for Jonathan to register what she'd just said.

Quickly closing the gap between them, he leaned into her, his lips crashing against hers as she greedily accepted. Her blanket fell to her waist as she wrapped her arms around him, her fingers snaking through his shaggy brown hair as the warmth of his lips helped her forget the chill of the rain outside.

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Flashback

He'd driven back to Hawkins in silence. The hometown he hadn't expected to see again waiting for him, almost untouched even after living in the city for more than a decade. The streets were quiet as he pulled into the parking lot of a local bar, boxes and bags of clothes piled high in the backseat of his Cadillac.

After Sarah's death, he and Diane fell apart at the seams. And he'd just

simply fallen apart. It hadn't been a surprise when she'd told him that it was over and she thought he should go. He was drinking too much, he wasn't emotionally available to her, he was missing time at work... all valid reasons to be unhappy but he knew there was more to it than that. She blamed him for their daughter's death. How could she not? He certainly did. If he hadn't pushed for the experimental treatments... maybe she could have been around longer. He sent his own daughter to the grave. He cut her life down to a fraction of what her remaining time could have been.

The divorce papers on the passenger seat of his car taunted him, reminding him that what he'd once thought of as stable could completely turn to dust in his hands. He had the perfect life: a loving wife, a beautiful daughter, a stable and fulfilling job, and financial security. All gone up in smoke.

Where else could he go? Diane had told him he didn't have to leave right away but he'd stoically packed his bags and walked out. He didn't want to do her any more harm than he already had.

He couldn't help but think about Hawkins Lab. He'd grown up in this small town, yet never heard about the lab much before he moved away. Granted, he'd been eighteen at the time and the only things he'd really cared about back then were girls, parties, and getting the hell out of this hole-in-the-wall town.

He'd met Diane in Indianapolis and his parents had moved down south to Georgia five years ago so what was he even coming home to? Familiarity? Perhaps that was it or perhaps it was an unconscious pull to the place he'd taken his daughter. Hawkins National Laboratory. Being close to this place was a perpetual reminder of his guilt, his mistakes and failures. In a way, it was almost like he was punishing himself.

So with a modest chunk of his family savings and a tip from a buddy on the force that the Hawkins Police Department was in desperate need of a new chief since the incumbent was getting ready to retire, Hopper had headed back to his hometown with his tail between his legs and the stench of beer on his breath.

It was going on 9 o'clock and the evening crowd was beginning to drift in as Hopper settled himself into a bar stool.

"What'll it be?" A bartender with a beer belly and receding hairline asked, leaning an elbow on the bar.

Hopper shook his head. "I'll take whatever you've got on tap, just keep 'em coming,"

"You got it, buddy," The man replied before returning with a frothy glass of beer. Hopper took a sip from the glass, the cold liquid chilling his throat as he sucked his top lip in to get the foam from the beer head off his mustache.

He had just lit a cigarette when he heard a familiar voice behind him. "Oh my god...Hopper?!"

He turned to see Joyce Mathers, now Joyce Byers, standing just a couple feet away from him. Her petite frame hadn't changed over the years and even sitting on a stool, the top of her head was below eye-level. She looked a bit more worse-for-wear than she'd been in high school but he'd recognize her anywhere.

"Hey Joyce," He replied politely, feigning as much enthusiasm as he could muster in his state.

"I'll be damned," Joyce breathed, crossing her arms and staring at him. "What are you doin' out here? Aren't you living in the city now?"

"Well, you know how it goes," Hopper retorted sarcastically, the rim of his glass hovering at his lips. "Places like this, you just can't stay away,"

"Pfft," Joyce scoffed, chuckling. "I'm sure. But really, god, Hop, it's been so long..." She said, pulling herself up into the seat beside him.

The bartender came over as Joyce got herself situated. "What can I get you ma'am?"

"Oh, uh, Michelob Light, please?" The brunette responded, digging through her purse for her cigarettes before turning her attention back to Hopper. "Seriously though, what brings you out here anyway?"

Hopper stalled, taking a sip of his beer to give himself a moment to formulate a response that wouldn't involve laying his complete emotional downward spiral out in front of her. "Heard Hawkins was in need of a

new police chief," He said simply, as though transitioning from homicide detective in the city to police chief in this podunk town wasn't a downgrade.

"Wow," Joyce breathed, sticking a cigarette between her lips and fishing in her purse for a lighter. Her ability to sound even mildly impressed was a wonder to him. "Guess that means you're sticking around?"

"Guess so," Hopper said evenly, taking another sip. "So what about you? You and Lonnie still a thing? You've got a kid, don't you?"

"Two, actually," Joyce corrected, giving up on her search and hanging her purse up on one of the hooks under the bar. "You got a light?"

Hopper nodded, retrieving a lighter and lighting her cigarette for her as she continued. "Will's six, going into first grade in the fall and Jonathan's eleven," Hopper ignored the way hearing about Joyce's little boy made his heart drop. Her youngest son was Sarah's age... He fought away the demons in his head that picked and prodded at him, reminding him Sarah would never see the first grade or any other grade... or any milestone ever again.

"As for Lonnie," She went on, her facial expression and tone of voice notably changing to one of contempt. "We're actually in the middle of a divorce,"

Hopper's ear pricked up at that. What a coincidence...

Joyce shook her head, taking a long drag on her cigarette and slowly exhaling as she spoke. "We had court today and when I tell you my head feels like it's gonna explode..." She said with an emphatic exhale, tapping the ash off of her cigarette into the ashtray on the bar. "The kids have been with their grandmother all day and I'm on my way to pick them up,"

"Damn," Hopper said, expertly concealing his own dread at the thought of having to go through the divorce process himself. "Sorry to hear that,"

"Yeah," Joyce sighed. "You were completely right about Lonnie," She said, catching Hopper's interest. "Everything you said when we graduated. I was an idiot,"

"No, Joyce," Hopper countered. "He's the idiot. It takes a special kind of

asshole to screw up a good thing."

Joyce smiled, reminiscing. "You were always so protective of me back then,"

"Yeah, well," Hopper said gruffly, quietly wallowing in his own self-loathing. "It takes an ass to know an ass,"

"Ha!" Joyce chuckled, shaking her head. "Whatever you say, Hop,"

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Present Day - Earlier Wednesday Evening

Mike had gone home after school with the plan to talk to El. He'd found himself lucky enough that his mom wasn't making dinner yet and he had the kitchen phone all to himself, even if just for a short while. He felt his heart rate quickening as the phone rang and he waited anxiously for someone to pick up. When Becky's voicemail message came through the receiver, Mike visibly deflated with disappointment. He felt awkward leaving a message so he resolved to just hang up and try again later.

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Present Day - Wednesday Night

"How ya doin', kiddo?" Hopper greeted Will as he entered his hospital room. "Tomorrow's the big day,"

"Yeah, I'm ready," Will said definitively, putting aside the sketchbook and box of crayons his brother had brought for him. "What time are you picking me up tomorrow?"

"Mmm, I'd say around 9," Hopper replied, removing his hat and setting it down on the tray by Will's bed, next to his art supplies. "That's what your doctor said at least,"

"I can't wait to get out of here..." Will said as he exhaled, laying his head back against the pillows.

"Yeah, well," Hopper said with a tilt of his head. "Nobody likes

hospitals,"

"That's for sure," Will agreed. He'd been cooped up in this room for a couple weeks now and while his friends had visited as much as they could, it wasn't the same as being home. He even missed school and just being around people. His incision was healing well and he'd need to take it easy but the doctors said he could have the rest of his recovery be in the comfort of home and that was a relief. No more hospital food, no more being a half hour away from everything and everyone he knew, no more long, boring days in-between visitors.

A garbled voice came from the radio on Hopper's belt, catching both his and Will's attention.

"What was that?" Will inquired curiously.

"My radio's probably catching talk from the local precinct," Hopper surmised, removing the radio from his belt. "I'm out of range for Hawkins so this thing grabs whatever frequency it can find," He was about to turn it off when the voice came in again, a little clearer this time.

"Female... mid-thirties... vehicle crash... green Ford Escort... Route 29, send a bus..."

Will watched as Hopper's eyes widened with concern as he clutched the radio in his hand. "What is it?"

"Stay here, I'll be back," Hopper said before ducking out of the room, leaving Will to sigh and sink back into his pillows.

"I don't really have any other options..." He mumbled, grabbing his sketchbook from the tray by his bed.

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Route 29 was a long two-lane expressway that cut through Clarksville and while it wasn't heavily used, especially at this time of night, it connected several neighborhoods to the main local businesses including gas stations, restaurants, grocery stores, and Clarksville's tiny mall. The road was relatively dark, sandwiched between two stretches of dense woods with streetlights sparsely scattered along the

edges of the asphalt.

There was only one person Hopper knew in this area with that specific make, model, and color car and while he could tell himself that there was a possibility it wasn't her, something in his gut told him he needed to check it out anyway.

As Hopper made his way down the slick pavement, his windshield wipers going full speed, he could see lights from emergency vehicles about a mile down the expressway.

"C'mon old girl, don't let me down," Hopper patted the dash of his beat up old SUV as it struggled to keep from sliding in the heavy rain.

There were two police cars and an ambulance pulled up along the side of the road when Hopper arrived. He could see a dark green car down in the ditch with its entire front end demolished by the tree it was up against. Emergency personnel surrounded the vehicle but judging by the lack of urgency in their movements, Hopper could tell the situation was not good.

"Jim Hopper, Chief of Police down in Hawkins," He said as he approached the scene, flashing his badge. "I heard the call over the radio. What do we got?"

"Hey, thanks for the help, Chief, but looks like she's D.O.A.," One of the young police officers replied, speaking loudly to be heard over the rain. "We're waiting on the coroner now,"

"I see," Hopper said, his eyebrows furrowed. "Mind if I take a look?"

"Sure," The officer replied. "Looks like she was out on some kind of joyride. Not exactly what I'd expect for someone her age but..." He shrugged as he followed Hopper up to the car. As they came under the cover of the trees, the roar of the rain lessened. "Couldn't find an ID or license with her and judging by the smell, I'm thinkin' she's had a few if you know what I mean,"

"She didn't have a wallet in her purse?" Hopper turned to look at him suspiciously.

"No, sir," The officer replied. "Purse was just about empty, actually,"

"Hmm," Hopper hummed, frowning as he took a few steps closer and peered into the driver's side of the vehicle. Shattered glass covered the front seats of the car and despite the cover of the trees, some rain had made its way inside, leaving the dash wet. Hopper stared at the steering wheel as a spattering of blood mixed with raindrops and slid down the front of it.

"She was hung over the steering wheel when we got here," The officer behind Hopper explained. "One of the medics lifted her up and sat her like that to check her out before we realized she was gone," He clicked his tongue, crossing his arms. "No seatbelt, either,"

Hopper exhaled sharply through his nose. "Well, I can save you the trouble of an I.D.," He said gruffly. "This is Rebecca Ives,"

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"Hypnotized, I'm shakin' to my knees. I gotta know tonight if you're alone tonight. Can't stop this feeling, can't stop this fight..."

38. Don't Dream It's Over

[A/N: Hey guys! This chapter was difficult to write for some reason... let me know what you think, though! Things are definitely getting more intense...]

Chapter 38: Don't Dream It's Over (by Crowded House)

"There's a battle ahead, many battles are lost. But you'll never see the end of the road while you're traveling with me..."

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Rain dripped from the brim of Hopper's hat as he jogged up to the Ives' front door. He wasn't looking forward to breaking the news to El and Terry, nor was he certain as to how he would even do it. Straight and to the point had served him well in the past but he was working through his own emotions seeing Becky's lifeless body in that driver's seat. It felt surreal and for that reason, he kept that wall up that helped him carry on and do his job despite whatever was going on internally. While he and Becky hadn't exactly been close, they had shared something of a relationship considering they were jointly fostering El. Their one-night-stand only complicated matters and Hopper couldn't focus on that right now. He had a job to do and first and foremost, he had to ensure that El was taken care of.

"Anybody home?" He called out against a clap of thunder as he pounded on the front door and a flash of lightning lit up the sky. Peering through the window, the living room looked empty and he couldn't hear anyone coming to the door. After knocking again, he paused to consider his options. On a whim, he checked the door handle and was surprised to find it unlocked.

"Hello?" He called into the house as he cautiously stepped inside. Something didn't feel right. The house was eerily quiet as Hopper stealthily made his way around the first floor, checking each room and finding them all strangely empty. The lights were on and even the TV in the living room was tuned to the usual game show channel Terry liked to watch. Becky had been traveling alone, at least that's how it'd appeared at the scene, so if that was the case where were

Terry and El? His hand on his gun, Hopper began to ascend the staircase to the second floor, his senses heightened and ready for whatever he may encounter. The wooden steps creaked beneath his weight and he pulled his flashlight from his belt to illumine the darkened upstairs. From what he could see and hear as he approached the landing, it didn't appear that anyone was home. The second floor was silent and while the doors to each room were open, their lights were all off.

"Chief?" A small voice behind him startled him just as he made it halfway to the landing. He drew his gun on instinct, spinning around only to find El at the bottom of the staircase looking confused.

"Jesus," Hopper muttered under his breath, returning his gun to its holster as he trotted back downstairs, his adrenaline slowly ebbing. "Hey El, where's Terry? And where were you?"

"Doctor appointment, with Becky," El replied, then pointed to herself and added. "With friends,"

Hopper sighed, switching his flashlight off and putting it back in his belt as he reached her. "Alright, come with me," He said brusquely, walking past her and out into the front yard without giving her the opportunity to protest. Not that she would have anyway; Hopper was like one of her parents and she knew she could trust him, even if she didn't know what was going on. The heavy rain had ceased and the clouds were only spitting at this point as El scurried to follow Hopper to his SUV.

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Hopper stewed in his thoughts on the way back to the hospital. How was he going to tell El about Becky? Where was she going to live? Where was Terry if she was supposed to be with Becky? Had Terry been in the accident but somehow was ejected from the car and they hadn't found her yet? That was the strangest part - Terry wasn't one to just disappear so if she was missing, there weren't many possibilities. While he couldn't prove it, a part of him wondered if the lab had found them after all. Something in his gut just didn't feel right. Maybe the lab had heard about Becky's accident and figured out El was living at the Ives'? Could Terry be dead, too? It was all

Hopper could do to focus on driving as these thoughts and more bombarded him. By the time they'd arrived at the hospital less than ten minutes later, he still hadn't come up with a plan for telling El about Becky. He wouldn't worry any of them about his suspicions but for now, the safest thing to do was getting the hell out of there. Besides, El might need someone other than him to comfort her when she finally found out about her aunt.

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"Hey, what's -" Will said, pulling himself upright as Hopper and El entered the room. "Oh, hi El!"

El waved, smiling slightly as she hovered in Hopper's shadow.

"Change of plans, kid," Hopper said as he began packing up Will's personal belongings his brother had brought from home. "You're getting outta here tonight,"

"I am?" Will asked, dumbfounded. "What-why? How?" He looked to El for an explanation but she only shrugged.

"Tonight, tomorrow morning - it's not gonna make a difference," Hopper said briskly as he moved about the room, collecting things. "You're good to go,"

"I still don't understand -"

"You don't need to understand," Hopper said sternly, finally finding a bag with some regular clothes in it stored in a cabinet. "I've got a nurse coming in here in a second to unhook you from all this crap and then we're outta here. I'll explain the rest later. Do you understand?" He tossed a generic pair of scratchy hospital sweatpants and a Jump Rope for Heart T-shirt onto Will's lap.

"Um, yeah," Will nodded, picking up the foreign clothes. "Okay,"

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The ride back to Hawkins was quiet with neither El nor Will thinking now was an appropriate time to start questioning the chief. Something was up, though, and they could tell by the pained

furrowing of his brow and the stoic silence in his demeanor. They were startled by his voice suddenly punctuating the quiet ten minutes into the ride.

"Something happened tonight," Hopper said, as though answering a question. "I'm not gonna get into it right now but the best thing, the safest thing, is for everyone to be in Hawkins. You're just gonna have to trust me on this and let me figure everything out,"

The kids wordlessly agreed and the chief sighed, plucking his radio from his belt as they sped down the highway. As they were getting closer to Hawkins, the likelihood of being able to make a connection was getting better with every mile.

"Hey Flo, it's the chief. Do you copy?"

It took a minute but the radio crackled to life and she responded, "You're lucky I'm still at the station, Hop," She chuckled good-naturedly. "What's going on?"

"I need you to call Joyce Byers and let her know I'm on my way to her place. There's been a few changes in plans and I'll explain more to her when I get there,"

"That's a little vague, don't you think?" Flo replied. "Is there anything else I can tell her?"

"No," Hopper said simply. "That's it. Thanks, Flo,"

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They'd barely noticed the rain slowing down or the way everything had started to get dark, even despite the way the thick expanse of rain clouds had already cast shadows over Hawkins. The center console between them was pretty uncomfortable but neither cared as Jonathan snaked his hand through Nancy's hair, cradling her head as they kissed. Her skin tingled at the sensation of his fingers tentatively brushing against the back of her neck. Everything else had fallen away and it was just the two of them - no distractions, no awareness of what was happening around them until a tap on the window startled them both into near- heart attacks.

Jonathan looked up at his window to see his boss, Mr. Garrett, still in his white pharmacist jacket and standing by the car. He tried to stifle his amusement but the knowing smirk on the older man's face was a clear indication he'd seen more than enough to know why Jonathan was still at work a half hour after clocking out.

Nancy bit her lip, ducking her head down in mild embarrassment as Jonathan wound the window down, his hair still a bit disheveled. "Uh, h-hi Mr. Garrett," He stammered.

The older man lifted his eyebrows. "Jonathan, I was surprised to see your car still parked outside but..." He glanced over at Nancy. "I suppose I'm not surprised anymore," He chuckled and heat rose to Jonathan's cheeks. "Anyway, I'm glad I '*caught*' you," He grinned at that, more amused at his sense of humor than Jonathan was at the intrusion. "Your mom called looking for you but I'd told her you'd already left. She said something about a change in plans with your brother and wanted to know when you'd be home,"

"Will?" Jonathan asked, suddenly not feeling so embarrassed anymore as his mind shifted gears. "Is he okay?"

"Well, I suppose so, son," Mr. Garrett replied, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his lab coat. "She didn't sound upset but she did say it was important. I think you ought to get home and see what's goin' on,"

"Yeah," Jonathan nodded, gripping the steering wheel. "Yeah, okay. Thanks, Mr. Garrett,"

"Sure thing, Jonny," Mr. Garrett said with a smile, nodding respectfully to Nancy who lifted a hand to give a small wave.

After a beat, Nancy asked with a smirk, "Jonny?"

"He's got a grandson with the same name," Jonathan shrugged, running a hand through his hair. The awareness of what had just transpired between them suddenly blatantly apparent in his mind. "It's been a thing since I started working for him. I don't mind,"

Nancy chuckled, looking down at her lap as she also became a bit

more bashful than she'd been a few minutes prior. "It's kinda cute,"

"Yeah?" Jonathan looked over at her and she lifted her gaze to him.

"Yeah,"

As the tension began to rise between them again, Jonathan forced himself to shake it off. "I should get home and see what's going on,"

"Yeah," Nancy said as she exhaled.

"Did you - uh, did you want to come, too?" Jonathan stumbled over his words, not quite sure how to interact with her but letting his instincts guide him. "Or, I mean, I could drop you off at home if you want..."

"I wouldn't mind," Nancy said. "Coming over, I mean. If that's okay. Do you think your mom would mind?"

Jonathan shook his head as he turned the car on and shifted into reverse. "It's probably not a big deal if she didn't sound upset," He said, switching gears and pulling away from the store front. "Besides, you were around through everything else with Will being in the hospital. It's probably just something to do with who's picking Will up. Maybe they changed his discharge time,"

"Okay," Nancy said, reaching around to pull her seatbelt on as her heart fluttered at the thought of the uncharted territory she'd just embarked on with Jonathan.

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"What do you think we should do with her?" A young orderly mused menacingly as he looked down at the catatonic woman between them. His curly brown hair was cut short and there was a sheen of sweat over his forehead.

"Cut it out, Jake," The other orderly, another young man with strawberry blonde hair and almost invisibly light eyebrows, rolled his eyes at his coworker. "We wait for Dr. Brenner; those were our instructions,"

"Oh," Jake's eyes flashed as he looked down at Terry, her gaze never lifting from the floor, her body never flinching in response to his aggression. "C'mon Freddie, don't be such a pussy,"

"Why don't you say that to Dr. Brenner when he gets here?" Freddie shot back, narrowing his gaze as Jake traced circles on Terry's bare shoulder.

"See, this is why you need to get out more," Jake said haughtily. "Or get laid. You're too uptight," He laughed as he lifted the hem of Terry's night gown. "Here ya go, Freddie! Let her have it!" He cackled as Freddie grabbed his arm and shoved so he'd let go of Terry's night gown.

"You're fucking sick," Freddie scowled.

Jake laughed. "I'm just messin' around," He rolled his eyes, stepping away from Terry and leaning against the concrete wall. "You think I got you this gig because I think you're a cool roommate?" Freddie did his best to ignore the other orderly, even as he continued to speak. "Look, it's a win-win situation here; you get to make some cash and I get to have a roommate that isn't a complete loser. It's your first year of college, dude, lighten up. *Live a little*,"

"You don't see anything wrong with any of this?" Freddie spun around, hushing his voice. "I mean, who is this woman? Why do they have us watching her?"

"Who gives a shit, man?" Freddie scoffed, pushing himself off the wall and walking up behind Terry. Her head was hanging slightly down and her facial expression hadn't changed since the moment they'd brought her into this room. "She's just some retard they probably found out on the street. Maybe they'll do some crazy lobotomy type shit. You're a science major or something, aren't you? You should like that," He stuck his face mere inches away from Terry's, making strange expressions and laughing when she never moved a muscle. A faint smirk appeared at the corner of his lip as an idea came to him and with no warning, he slapped Terry hard across the face.

"What the hell are you doing!?" Freddie exclaimed, looking to the two-way mirror and hoping none of their supervisors were seeing

what he was doing. No doubt, if Jake went down for something he would be dragging him along, too.

Jake laughed heartily, crossing his arms and staring down at Terry in amusement as a red mark slowly appeared across her face. "I think she's brain-dead, dude," He quipped and before Freddie could respond, the door opened and Agents Kramer and Carlson entered, followed by Dr. Brenner. The two young orderlies immediately quieted in the presence of their superiors, somewhat respectful, somewhat fearful.

"Well, now," Dr. Brenner's smile didn't reach his eyes and he completely ignored the two orderlies' presence. "It has been quite some time, Terry,"

"The two of you can clock out," Agent Kramer said to the young men, nodding to the door behind them. "You're done for the night,"

"Yes sir," They replied in unison before exiting.

Once they were gone, Agent Carlson spoke, "I've got several of our men out looking for the girl. I expect they'll find her before night's end,"

"Make certain that you do," Dr. Brenner replied briskly, still scanning Terry with his eyes, the red mark on her face even more apparent now. "Then again, this may be just what we need to draw her here,"

"Sir?"

"She knows who Terry is now," Dr. Brenner explained. "Perhaps that knowledge will work in our favor and draw her out of hiding,"

"So, you're keeping her alive?" Agent Kramer clarified and Dr. Brenner nodded.

"She's more useful to us alive, for now. Even despite her... incapacitation," He said thoughtfully. "And it's apparent she isn't going anywhere,"

"Dr. Brenner, when we returned from the Ives' house, one of the technicians told me there is some video surveillance footage you may

be interested in seeing," Agent Kramer said. "I haven't seen it myself yet but -"

"Carlson, ensure that Ms. Ives has the proper accommodations for her stay with us," Dr. Brenner said briskly, cutting off Agent Kramer as he moved to leave the room, then turned to Kramer. "Let's see what your technician found,"

.....

Everyone had just gotten to the Byers house and settled down when Jonathan arrived with Nancy in tow. Joyce had fussed over Will, insisting he settle down on the couch and continue to rest despite his hospital discharge. Hopper was still trying to figure out how he was going to tell El about her aunt while also running through all of the things he needed to take care of in his head. He needed to go back up to Clarksville and check in with the coroner up there. He needed to somehow figure out what the lab knew, if they knew anything, and to what degree he needed to be cautious with El's location and his own involvement. He needed to figure out a new plan for El's living arrangements and somehow determine a more long-term plan for her. But where could she even go and actually be safe? And amidst all of that, he needed to tell El that her aunt was dead and who knows what kind of response he would get from that.

"Joyce, can I see you in the kitchen for a second?" Hopper said, his eyebrows furrowed with thought as Joyce draped a blanket over Will on the couch.

"Sure," She replied, ruffling her youngest son's hair. "You and El hang out in here, okay?"

"Do you know what's going on?" Will asked once his mom left the room but El shook her head as she sat on the opposite end of the couch. "They're being kind of weird..." He observed, propping his elbow up on a couch pillow, then sighed. "I guess if it was important, they'd tell us, right?" El shrugged and the two sat quietly for a minute until Will sat up again, looking around. "Where's - there it is!" He pointed to a bag nestled on the floor by the coffee table. "Do you wanna see some of the drawings I did in the hospital?" Will asked and El's gaze followed the direction he was pointing.

"Okay," She said quietly.

"Hand me that bag, please," Will said. "I think my sketchbook is in there,"

Meanwhile, Joyce met Hopper in the kitchen. She was getting around better on her own but trying not to overdo it. She wrapped her robe tighter around her body as she crossed her arms. "Alright, Hop," She said in a hushed voice to ensure the kids couldn't hear. "What the hell is going on?"

"We've got a problem," He said in an equally quiet tone. "Potentially a few, actually,"

Joyce stared at him dubiously. "Well, are you gonna tell me?"

"There was an accident tonight, in Clarksville," Hopper glanced back at the living room and could faintly hear Will talking to El. "Becky's dead, Joyce,"

Joyce's eyes widened and she stepped back unsteadily, at which point Hopper quickly grabbed her and stabilized her. "A-Are you sure?"

"Yes," Hopper nodded solemnly. "I knew she drank but I just... I just didn't expect..." He found himself trailing off and exhaled sharply to right himself. "It looks like she was drunk, ran off the road, hit a tree..."

"Oh god..." Joyce covered her mouth with her hand, glancing back in the direction of the living room. "Does El know?"

Hopper shook his head. "I haven't told her yet. God damnit, I don't know how I'm gonna do this, Joyce,"

"It's okay, it's okay," Joyce shook her head. "We'll tell her together but... oh my god..." She paused. "What about Terry?"

"That's the other thing," Hopper said pointedly. "She's gone. No trace of her in the house, at the scene, and El was apparently with friends when all this happened,"

Realization dawning on her face, Joyce's eyes widened again. "You

don't think -"

"That's what I wanna figure out," Hopper replied, knowing the line of thought she was having. "And I figured it was better to get Will out of that area for the time being until we know exactly what happened up there tonight,"

"Yeah," Joyce nodded forcefully. "Yeah, you're right. Thank-thank you, Hop,"

She ran a hand through her hair and reached for her pack of cigarettes on the kitchen table just as the front door opened. Hopper instinctively reached for his gun but relaxed when he saw Jonathan step through.

"Hey, what's - whoa, Will!" He said as he stepped into the living room to see Will pleasantly showing El his drawings. "You're home?"

"Yeah," Will shrugged, then noticed the person behind him. "What's Nancy doing here?"

"Hi Nancy," El smiled and the older teen waved.

"Hi El," She smiled back and even despite the momentary pause, Jonathan faltered in explaining, leaving Nancy to jump in, "We were just... hanging out," She looked at him and forced herself to keep from blushing.

Jonathan spoke up at that point. "We heard there was a change in plans... I guess this is it?" He chuckled, pleasantly surprised to see his brother finally home. "Everything's okay?"

"As far as we know," Will shrugged as El followed the conversation with her quiet stare.

"Hey Jonathan," Joyce said as she walked to the doorway of the living room with Hopper just behind her. She smiled knowingly at Nancy. "Hi Nancy,"

"Hi Mrs. Byers," Nancy replied politely, still standing by the door with Jonathan.

Joyce turned to the couch. "El, sweetie, can we talk to you for a second?" El looked to Will with confused wariness but Joyce reassured her. "You aren't in trouble, sweetheart. We just need to talk to you about something," El obediently stood up from the couch and followed the two adults into the kitchen as Jonathan and Nancy finally took their coats off.

"So uh," Jonathan said, unsure what to do at this point. He and Nancy hadn't even had the chance to discuss what was going on between them and he certainly wasn't going to have that conversation in front of his family. "How are you feelin', buddy?" He asked his brother, taking a seat on the couch as Nancy sat next to him in the armchair.

"Have a seat, El," Joyce said, sitting down at the kitchen table and encouraging El to follow suit. She took a final drag of her half-finished cigarette and butted it out in the ashtray in front of her, waving the smoke away from El's face. "Okay, so..." She looked up at Hopper who, seemingly reading her mind, took a seat beside her. "There's something we need to tell you sweetie, and it's gonna be hard to hear but I just want you to know that we're here for you and everything's gonna be okay,"

El looked warily between the two of them, not saying a word.

Joyce sighed and looked at Hopper who chimed in, "There was an accident tonight, El," He started, then pursed his lips, hesitating. Joyce watched him for a second, exhaled, and continued for him.

"Your Aunt Becky was in an accident tonight," Joyce said, her tone honest but warm. "She got hurt very badly and..." Watching El's face and the understanding wash over her was enough to choke Joyce up. She took a breath to steady herself. "...she didn't make it," Tears welled in El's eyes and it was all Joyce could do to keep herself from crying, too. She didn't have any particularly strong feelings toward Becky but knowing the impact this was having on El was enough to break her heart. Hopper, meanwhile, sat stoically at the table, feeling completely inept at this but thankful to have Joyce there.

"Dead?" El asked, her voice small and wavering.

Joyce pursed her lips, "Yes, honey. Aunt Becky died tonight," She

reached across the table and grabbed El's hands in hers. "I am so sorry," She punctuated her words with gentle squeezes of the girl's hands as the El's face quietly crumpled and tears dripped onto the table.

"Do you have any idea where Terry - your mom could be?" Hopper asked but El shook her head vigorously.

"Is she... ?"

"We don't know, sweetie," Joyce answered before El had to articulate what she was wondering. "All we know right now is she's missing but the chief is gonna try to find her, okay?"

El felt like her chest was going to implode. There was a pressure building inside her that felt like it would consume her whole. It'd only been a couple months but she'd really grown attached to her new family, her *real* family as everyone had been calling them. She hadn't been sure what to think of them at first but Becky had done so much for her. She did her hair and helped her feel better when she was sick. She took her in and made sure they always had Eggos. She hugged her and talked to her and made her feel safe and comfortable even though she knew Becky had been just as nervous at first, too. They were family. She finally had a *family* and now they were... gone? And Terry... her mom... she wasn't dead but... they didn't know where she was? What if she was dead? Could she connect with her? That would tell her, wouldn't it?

El closed her eyes, forcing her breathing to slow down so she could try to focus but all she saw when she closed her eyes was Becky's face, her mom's face, and nothing happened. She couldn't get to the blackness, she couldn't make a connection to Terry, so did that mean her mom was dead, too? She was too emotionally drained already to make a clear connection and the despair and frustration suddenly exploded from her like a geyser.

"No!" El screamed, banging her fists on the table in anguish as every drawer, cabinet door, and shelf came flying open and an array of objects went soaring across the kitchen. Tupperware and dishes crashed to the linoleum and silverware flew across the room, ricocheting off the walls.

"*Shit!*" Hopper said, jumping up to cover the two of them from flying debris but as quickly as the outburst had happened, El's energy deflated like a balloon and she began to sob heartily.

"What's going on in there?!" Jonathan exclaimed from the other room, having stood up at the sound of the commotion to see the cabinets emptied and a slew of broken glass and random kitchen items all over the floor. "Are you guys okay?" Jonathan asked as Nancy stood behind him, eyebrows furrowed in confusion and surprise at the sight before them.

"It's fine," Hopper replied gruffly, settling back into his chair now that the danger seemed to be over.

"Oh sweetheart," Joyce scooted around the side of the table and closer to El, pulling her into her so she could cry on her shoulder. "I know," She said soothingly, running her hand up and down El's back. "I know, it's gonna be okay. But I know it hurts,"

"What happened?" Will asked from the couch, starting to get up. "What's going on?"

"Don't get up, Will. Just hold on a sec," Jonathan said, stepping into the kitchen, carefully avoiding the Tupperware lids and broken glass at his feet. Nancy began to follow but he stopped her. "Stay back, there's glass everywhere,"

"I'm fine, Jonathan," She said pointedly, stubbornly following behind him. "El, what's wrong?" She said gently, gingerly touching the girl's shoulder as she blubbered into the crook of Joyce's neck.

"El's aunt was in an accident tonight," Hopper explained to the teens. "She didn't make it,"

"Oh man..." Jonathan breathed and Nancy crouched down next to El and Joyce, reaching for the girl's free hand and holding it tightly. She knew better than most how in these moments of grief, sometimes there really isn't anything that can be said.

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"Hey now, hey now... Don't dream it's over. Hey now, hey now... When

the world comes in, they come, they come to build a wall between us... We know they won't win..."

39. Bright Eyes

[A/N: Woooo! Hope all my U.S. followers had a nice holiday! I started working on a 4th of July one-shot last night - just something short and sweet. Maybe I'll try and finish that today and post it later, too.]

Chapter 39 Bright Eyes (by Art Garfunkel)

*"Bright eyes, burning like fire. Bright eyes, how can you close and fail?
How can the light that burned so brightly suddenly burn so pale?"*

.....

Flashback

It was just past dinner time but El had been staying out with her friends almost every day after school. Becky had just gotten off the phone after being told by Terry's doctor's office that the doctor would need to reschedule her appointment. They hadn't explained why but was it really any of her business? She's feigned politeness, holding back her annoyance at the last minute schedule change. She'd intended to take Terry to the appointment tonight since it was the office's only late night and they were scheduled to be there at 6:30. So much for that...

It was difficult keeping tabs on everything - working, caring for Terry and El (though El had proven herself to be relatively self-sufficient), and managing all of the day-to-day needs of the household. Rose was only working twice a week now since Becky could barely afford to pay her and the strain on Becky was certainly showing. She was always tired, a bit more irritable than she'd prefer, and it still never seemed to be enough.

Becky pulled open the refrigerator door, resigning herself to make dinner since she didn't have to leave in the next fifteen minutes, only to be reminded that they were in need of a mid-week grocery shopping trip. Rose used to do that when she worked more often but with only working two days a week, one on the weekend and one during the week, it looks like that had slipped through the cracks. Several odds and ends but everything she could make would require at least one missing ingredient. Becky opened the freezer door and picked up the box of Eggos from the

door, finding only one frozen waffle remaining in the plastic.

"Alright," Becky said to herself, sighing.

Terry was in the living room watching her usual shows and Becky came in to speak to her.

"So it looks like we're goin' out after all. We've gotta hit up the grocery store if any of us are gonna eat tonight," She said to her sister, walking over to pick up the remote when she heard a knock at the front door. Becky quirked her head curiously, one eyebrow lifted as she walked over to the front door. She could see the silhouette of a person through the curtain over the window but nothing more.

"Yes?" She said, cautiously opening the door and positioning herself in the crack. "Can I help you?"

The man outside seemed harmless enough, dressed in some sort of utility uniform. Somewhat heavyset with a thick mustache, he looked at her with friendly but tired eyes. "Evening ma'am, I'm from the electric company and we're running inspections of the properties in the area to check for frayed wires and other hazards,"

"Now's not a good time," Becky replied dismissively. "I was just about to head out,"

"I understand that, ma'am," The man replied respectfully. "And I don't mean to waste your time. It should only take about fifteen minutes,"

"Look, I appreciate the concern but -"

Before Becky could say anything else, a slew of people were behind her, seemingly having come in through the back door. Hadn't it been locked? Had she forgotten to lock it? Her mind raced as panic set in and a half dozen men in suits surrounded her in the foyer.

"What the hell do you all think you're doing?!" She spun around and exclaimed, doing her best to hide how terrified she actually was. She tried to gauge the possibility of calling Hopper. She'd never really had any interaction with the lab but this had to be them. They'd somehow found her, found where El was hiding, and she didn't know what to do.

"Where's the girl?" One of the men in suits asked, his voice authoritative as he narrowed his eyes at her.

Becky darted a glance over at her sister who, unsurprisingly, hadn't moved a muscle despite the intrusion. She could feel the body heat of the uniformed man on the porch; he'd stepped inside and closed the door behind him. She could almost feel his breath on her neck. "I don't know what you're talking about; it's just me and my sister,"

The man with the authoritative voice laughed, "Don't take us for fools, Ms. Ives," He said and the tone of his voice sent a chill down Becky's spine. "We know you've been hiding her - Eleven," He watched Becky's face for the slightest give at the mention of El's name. "Ah, you do know her. Well, I'd expect as much given that she's your niece. Now, we can keep things simple and easy if you just -"

"You bust into my house and expect me to just -" The agent backhanded her hard across the face, immediately stunning her into momentary silence as she clutched her face.

"Go check upstairs, see if she's on the second floor," He directed the other men and four of them went upstairs, leaving himself and the two other agents in the living room.

Becky gingerly touched her lip, glowering at the blood on her fingertips. "You're not gonna find her," She said, seething and shooting daggers with her eyes at the man.

"Oh, Ms. Ives," He tutted. "That's where you're wrong. We will find her, and return her to Dr. Brenner as directed. Whether or not you comply ultimately isn't relevant,"

"Second floor is clear," One of the other men said as the foursome came plodding back down the stairs, their guns drawn but lowered.

"I told you," Becky insisted, still glaring at the man in charge. "Now you and your friends get the hell out of my house before I call the cops,"

The man paused and his silence was unnerving. "Well, Ms. Ives, I'm afraid we can't quite do that," Within a half second, he removed his gun from its holster, flipped it around and whacked her hard in the back of the head

with its handle. Becky stumbled for a second, her eyes fluttering as she crumpled to the floor unconscious. Blood seeped from the back of her head as the man stared down at her and two of his underlings went into the living room to collect Terry.

Crouching down, he pressed two fingers to Becky's neck, feeling for her pulse. The uniformed man stepped forward and crouched next to him, setting a toolkit on the floor. He opened it up and retrieved a syringe from the case, handing it to his superior who looked down at Becky with disdain.

"Sleep well, Ms. Ives," He said coldly as he carefully stuck the needle in her neck. As he slowly pushed down the plunger, injecting what seemed to be air into her neck, his face maintained a steadily blank expression. A hardened, unreadable narrowing of the eyes and as he released the plunger, removing the needle from Becky's neck, he seemed equally unfazed.

Over in the living room, the two agents were having difficulty as the catatonic Terry began to thrash about violently.

"HHRRRRRNNGGGGGGGG!" A guttural growl escaped her throat as the agents struggled to secure her arms. One of them grabbed her by her hair to yank her head back and keep her from lurching forward in her seat.

"Do what you need to do but keep her alive," The head agent ordered. "Dr. Brenner wants to see her first,"

"What else you got in that case because this bitch is freaking crazy!" One of the agents trying to secure her called, narrowly avoiding getting hit in the face by Terry's arm haphazardly flying about.

"Give her a sedative," The head agent instructed the uniformed man who then hurried over to Terry's side, sticking her in the thigh with another needle. Within seconds, her body relaxed and she almost melted into the chair, making it easy for the men to pick her up and carry her out of the house like a ragdoll.

"The two of you can handle her," The head agent said to the men carrying Terry. "Get her to the lab and have an orderly watch her until Dr. Brenner arrives," He then turned to the remaining four men surrounding him. "The

rest of you can assist with this one," He said, gesturing to Becky's lifeless body with a kick of his foot to her shoulder.

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"Hey Mike, do you copy? Over," Will said into his supercom, trying to keep his voice relatively low. Nancy, Joyce, and El had disappeared into Joyce's room leaving Hopper, Jonathan, and Will out in the main areas. Hopper stewed in the kitchen, while Jonathan sat quietly in the living room. He'd objected at first when Will asked him to bring his supercom in to him but eventually obliged.

"Will? Yeah, I'm here. Over," Mike's voice crackled in the living room and Will turned the volume down so that the girls, particularly El, wouldn't overhear.

"Hey," Will said, unsure as to how to most delicately phrase the current situation. "Um, just so you know... El's aunt died tonight and she's kind of a mess. Over,"

"Wait, what?!" Mike replied. "What do you mean she *died*? Over,"

"Will," Jonathan scolded. "I don't know if El would appreciate you telling other people about her aunt just yet,"

"Mike's different, Jonathan," Will replied, making sure to keep his hand off the button so Mike couldn't hear. "I think El would want him to know," He then added hesitantly, "They've got this... thing,"

"*Hello?*" Mike called out impatiently. "Will! *Will?* Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I'm here, sorry," Will replied quickly.

"Is El okay? What happened? I'm on my way now I just gotta figure out what to tell my mom," Mike's mind was going a mile a minute and through the radio, it was all Will could do to keep up. "Wait a minute. How are you calling me on the supercom? Are you *home?*!"

"Yeah, it's uh, it's a little crazy over here, I think," Will replied, darting a glance at the kitchen, though he couldn't see Hopper. "I don't really know what's going on except apparently El's aunt was in a car accident and her mom is missing. We're all here at my house

now,"

There was a brief pause before Mike replied. "O-Okay. I'll be there soon just... just tell El to hold on, okay? Tell her to hold on,"

"Okay, Mike," Will replied. "See you soon. Over and out,"

As Will sat the supercom down at his side, Jonathan shook his head at him from his place on the armchair. "Now what if El doesn't react the way you're expecting? What if Mike coming over makes her more upset?"

Will shook his head, "That's the *last* thing I'm expecting,"

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The blanket on Joyce's bed was soft and El ran her hand up and down the velvety material as she sat cross-legged on top of the mattress. Joyce had brought her in here a few minutes ago to lay down and Nancy had followed but it'd taken a while for El to calm down enough to stop crying. It was a nicely decorated room, albeit a little messy. Jonathan had done his part as the dutiful son and straightened up while Joyce was in the hospital but dirty laundry was beginning to overflow from the basket in the corner and the bed had been haphazardly made earlier that day, creating rumples in the blanket.

"How about some tea, sweetheart?" Joyce offered. "Have you had tea before?"

El shook her head slightly and Joyce rubbed a hand up and down the girl's shoulder. "Okay, I'll make some and you can see if you like it. How's that sound?" El's silence was her answer and Joyce left the room, leaving Nancy and El alone.

Nancy sat on the opposite side of the bed, a million thoughts running through her head as she wondered how to comfort El. She could certainly relate to what El was going through and she thought about what she would find helpful if she were in El's position right this moment. It was easy to reflect on all of the times she wished there was someone who understood the grief she was going through, someone who knew what it was like to lose someone they cared

about. Nancy obviously knew that El had been through a lot in her young life but she felt like she could relate to her on some level with this. It was at least worth a try.

"When Barb died, it felt like everything changed," Nancy said quietly, breaking the silence. El didn't move but she listened intently. "It sucked because not only had I lost my best friend but I couldn't really talk to anyone about it, you know? With everything that happened back in November being a secret," Nancy crawled up onto the bed, laying on her stomach as she mirrored the way El ran her hand back and forth across the velvet blanket. "I've felt sick about it ever since she first disappeared... because of the guilt,"

"My fault," El whispered, her voice hoarse from crying as another round of tears welled up in her eyes.

"Why do you think this is your fault, El?" Nancy looked up at her, rolling onto her side and scooting closer to the girl.

El shook her head, her lip trembling as she fought to keep herself steady. She wasn't sure how to say everything running through her mind. Maybe she could have stopped the car if she'd been riding with Becky instead of at her friend's house. Maybe she could have prevented this from happening if she'd done something about Becky's drinking - not that she really knew what she could've done other than forcibly try to keep alcohol away from her aunt. She had this deep instinct to protect the ones she cared about. She'd gone her entire life not truly knowing what it meant to be loved or cared for. She'd thought she had that with Papa but after meeting Mike and the boys, then everyone else, she realized that what Papa had given her wasn't good. To this day, she still wasn't entirely sure what 'love' was but she heard people say it in passing - Will to his mom, Mrs. Wheeler to Mike, and even people on TV said it. She'd figured out there were a lot of different types of love but the one thing that was clear was that she'd never had that. Not until she escaped the lab.

So the people who mattered to her, the people who showed her that level of compassion and loyalty and trust, deserved all of it back from her. She'd sacrificed herself against the Demogorgon to protect her friends - the first people to show her what it meant to really care about another person. They'd taught her about friendship and loyalty,

trust and honesty. And now Becky and Terry had taught her about family - a completely new and beautiful thing that made her feel safe and secure and protected... now gone in the blink of an eye. Couldn't she have done something about it? So many opportunities missed and it was her fault. Becky could be alive if she had done *something* to stop this accident from happening.

Nancy scooted closer to El as the young girl began to cry again, her shoulders shaking with each sob. "Hey..." Nancy soothed. "It's gonna be okay... eventually. I know it really sucks," She pulled El into a hug and she laid her head against Nancy's shoulder. "It's gonna hurt for a while but we're all here for you, okay? You can talk to me anytime, you know that, right?"

El bit her lip and Nancy pulled back to look at her. "I'm serious. If you need anything, you can always come to me and I'll at least try to help,"

El's lip trembled as tears brimmed in her eyes, adding to the steady stream flowing down her cheeks. "Okay,"

"And don't blame yourself for this," Nancy continued. "You couldn't have known this was gonna happen," She paused, growing quiet. "Believe me, if anyone has a reason to feel guilty over something, it's me. I... I wasn't a good friend to Barb," She said as the two of them separated and El looked up at her with interest. "I left her alone and that's when that... that monster took her..." She found her mind repeating the same things she'd run through over and over for the past few months. How she regretted going up to Steve's room - not because of her relationship with him but because of what she gave up to do it. The way she'd brushed Barb off would haunt her, probably for the rest of her life. "But sometimes awful things just *happen* and it's not necessarily anyone's fault. Especially when people... have drinking problems... there isn't always anything you can do. You couldn't have known she was gonna get into an accident. If Becky had a drinking problem, I mean... I can't imagine what that's like because I haven't gone through it but... I don't think she'd want you to blame yourself for what happened. It's just... a really terrible thing that happened to someone you loved,"

El looked up at that word. 'Loved'? That's what she was feeling - love?

If love was such a good thing, why did her whole body hurt so much?

A gentle knock at the door got both girls' attention. "Can I open the door for a sec?" Jonathan asked from the other side.

"Yeah, go ahead," Nancy answered and Jonathan poked his head inside.

"Hey, uh," He said. "I hope this is okay but Will told Mike what happened and it looks like he's on his way over now,"

"Mike?" El's ears perked up at the mention of his name and she suddenly realized how much she missed him.

"Yeah," Jonathan nodded. "Is that okay? I can get Will to tell him if it's not a good idea,"

"No," El shook her head. "Mike can come,"

Nancy looked from El to Jonathan and shrugged her shoulders, smiling slightly.

"Okay," Jonathan said and ducked back out of the room.

Nancy waited until the door was fully closed before speaking. "How are you feeling, El?"

El sat quietly, inhaling deeply as the tear stains on her face began to dry. She gave a small shrug of her shoulders.

The two sat in silence for a few minutes before El murmured, "Not your fault,"

"Huh?" Nancy asked, thrown off by El's random utterance.

"You weren't there," El said slowly, deliberately. "With Barb. You didn't know,"

Nancy pursed her lips into a tight smile, fighting the wave of emotion that felt like it was crashing down on her. She let the overwhelming and tangled feelings of regret and relief wash over her, then recede back. It was as if a small piece of the weight she'd been carrying on

her shoulders for the past few months was lifted for a moment and she could finally breathe.

.....

"What are you gonna do, Hop?" Joyce asked as she filled a teapot with water and set it on the stove.

Hopper heaved a heavy sigh, his hands gripping the sides of the sink. "I don't know," He said under his breath, then groaned. "*Goddammit*,"

Joyce switched the burned on high and stepped away from the stove, leaning against the counter next to Hopper. "Well," She said. "One thing you can cross off your list is El is staying here,"

"Joyce, how can you -"

"*Don't* you even think about arguing with me on this, Hopper," Joyce scolded, cutting him off with a determined, powerfully motherly look in her eyes. "That girl needs somewhere stable and that's exactly what this is. Now I know things aren't always perfect but I could double up the boys' rooms and give her her own or Jonathan could take the basement. He's been begging me to let him move down there and turn it into his own little studio for years now anyway," She leaned an elbow against the counter to look Hopper in the face. "You don't need to protect me from everything, Hop. I'm a grown woman and I can -"

"Fine," Hopper said evenly. "She stays with you; you win," He sighed. "I know she's in good hands with you, Joyce. I just also know how much you and the boys have going on right now,"

"And we're handling it, Hop," Joyce said reassuringly. "Besides, it's probably better for El to have multiple people around that care about her and that she can talk to - especially with everything going on now. And you know as well as I do that it wouldn't be fair to hole her up in that little trailer in the woods all week long," She gave him a pointed look and he deadpanned, eventually sighing.

"You're right," Hopper groaned as if it pained him to admit. "Alright fine, but that's not the end of it. I still need to figure out exactly what

happened tonight,"

As the teapot began to whistle, Joyce walked over and turned the burner off, removing the pot from the stove. She poured the steaming hot water into a mug on the counter that already had a teabag in it.

Hopper watched Joyce prepare El's tea, mixing sugar into the cup as steam billowed from the cup. "You got anything I can drink?"

"See for yourself," Joyce gestured toward the fridge as she stirred the tea and set the spoon down on the counter. "I haven't been to the store in a while so I'm not sure we have much to choose from," She said as he rifled through the fridge's contents. A half-full carton of milk, two loose cans of Bud Light, a bottle of apple juice and another of orange juice, and a single can of A&W root beer were all he had to choose from.

"There's no hiding you've got kids with a selection like that," He joked as he plucked one of the cans of beer from the shelf and closed the fridge. He wasn't due to the lab for a couple of hours so in that time, he needed to determine as much as he could about what happened tonight. Having a plan for where El would stay, at least temporarily, was a start. Hopper wondered how long he'd last before the weight of everything happening tonight finally got to him. He'd seen a lot of things when he was a homicide detective so a dead body wasn't anything new but aside from Benny, he hadn't lost a friend to anything so traumatic or gruesome. Now it seemed every time he closed his eyes, he saw Becky's sad yet sassy smirk - the one she'd shoot him ever since their one-night encounter. Truth be told, he felt guilty. While he hadn't wanted a relationship with her, he *had* kind of brushed her off and made things unnecessarily awkward. He shouldn't have slept with her in the first place, knowing he wasn't interested in a relationship and knowing that it could make things complicated with El being involved and what not. But he did it anyway. His poor decision-making skills struck again and not only did he screw that up, he didn't handle it well afterwards. Unnecessarily cold and distant was a good way to put it. In an effort to keep from leading her on and letting her think their tryst had been anything more than a one-night fling, he'd kept her at arm's length. He'd run through every interaction they'd had since their hook-up, analyzing and scrutinizing his behavior.

"So what's next on your list?" Joyce asked, snapping Hopper out of his thoughts as he sat down at the kitchen table.

"Oh," Hopper said, popping the tab on the beer can. "I'll probably head back up to Clarksville to check in with the coroner up there, see how Becky's... doing. I'll be at the lab the rest of the night so I'll see what I can find out while I'm there,"

"Late night," Joyce said, adding a little bit more sugar to El's tea and stirring it up. "Oh, El, honey," She looked up to see the petite girl wandering down the hall and into the kitchen, followed by Nancy. "I was just about to bring you your tea,"

As Joyce set the stirring spoon down on the counter, El's eyes fell to Hopper and the beer can in front of him on the table. A sudden burning rose up in El's chest and she narrowed her eyes, growing angry and distraught.

Tilting her head and glowering at the can, she sent it flying across the kitchen where it hit the wall with a *thwack!*

"No!" She yelled, her eyes flashing with anger and a small trickle of blood seeping from her nostril as Hopper and Joyce stood in stunned silence. "No more!" El repeated, though this time her voice shook and her face began to crumple.

"El, it's just -"

"NO MORE!" El screamed loudly, her eyes filling with tears in the perpetual cycle of crying she'd been caught in all night.

"It's okay, El," Joyce said, setting the mug of tea down on the counter and taking quick strides over to her. "You're right; no more, okay?" She looked back at Hopper who just nodded, dumbfounded. She reached for a napkin from the dispenser on the table and gently dabbed at El's face. "Your tea's ready, do you wanna try it?"

El sniffled, then nodded, watching as Joyce retrieved the mug and brought it to her.

"Why don't we take this into the living room and you can watch something on TV with Will, okay? Maybe look at some more

drawings?" She suggested and El obliged, allowing the woman to gently guide her into the next room.

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The footage was grainy but there was no mistaking what they were seeing. Dr. Brenner, accompanied by Agents Carlson and Kramer, stood together in the surveillance room of the lab watching the betraying video on one of the screens in front of them. The technician seated at the desk adjusted different dials to zoom in on the figures in the film but that wasn't necessary. It was clear who and what they were seeing, even if the footage itself wasn't.

The distorted black and white film, despite its imperfections, showed a side view of the back entrance to the lab. From the camera's view, one could see the side of the brick building and the expanse of grass surrounding it, the trees that obscured the edges of the lot and a glimmer of the wire fence that bordered it. Five figures quickly crossed the grass, heading for the gate - a tall man in a police chief's uniform carrying a limp and lifeless little girl with very short hair. Following him, three young boys quickly jogged to keep up with the older man's pace.

"I noticed something was off when most of the cameras' footage had been dumped on the night of January first," The young technician explained. "Looks like whoever tampered with the videos forgot about this one,"

"This only confirms our suspicions, sir," Agent Kramer said to Dr. Brenner. "He's known where the girl is for quite some time,"

"Well, that certainly makes the search for her much easier," Dr. Brenner breathed.

"Should we go pick them up now?" Agent Carlson asked but Dr. Brenner put up a hand, shaking his head.

"Not yet," He replied. "Leave them in ignorance for the time being. Having this knowledge keeps us at an advantage," He stepped toward the open door leading to the hallway. "If Chief Hopper knows that we're aware of his involvement, he may move her again and make it

more difficult to track her. Have your team determine her precise location and monitor her movements. We can't afford any screw-ups this time around so be discreet. When the time is right, we'll bring her back where she belongs,"

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Flashback

What the hell was he thinking? The one time something could have actually turned out alright, he managed to screw it up - just like everything else. He'd been a fool to think otherwise. To think that everything he touched wouldn't fall to pieces in his hands.

The sky was clear as he made his way to his car. Joyce was still asleep in the house and he'd done everything in his power to keep from waking her when he stealthily slid out from under the covers. He'd promised himself he wouldn't do this with Joyce. She was different - she deserved better. Truthfully, she deserved better than him but he'd hoped she wouldn't realize that.

It'd been a few weeks since he came back to Hawkins and for some reason, women seemed to flock to the depressed guy in the corner of a bar with a beer in his hand and a permanent cloud over his heart. Maybe it was the idea of being able to 'rescue' him. Being able to pull him out of this 'funk' and revive his sense of liveliness. He couldn't speak to what went through a woman's head when they approached him but he could only speculate it had to do with some innate desire to 'fix' him. Unfortunately, the joke was always on them since there was no fixing something as broken as him. The pills his doctor gave him only numbed the pain and the booze helped him forget but every time he finally woke up with a beautiful woman in bed beside him, it all came back. He didn't deserve this, he didn't deserve anything. He'd try to deter the women when they approached, but it didn't take much pushing before he found himself in this situation. His self-loathing had become a regular part of what it meant to have a hangover and he'd crawl out of bed in the middle of the night - either retreating to his car and heading home or sitting out on the deck of his trailer, watching the moon's light bounce off the lake water.

Somehow he was able to forget himself in that momentary intimacy with whoever had taken on the challenge of 'cheering him up' or 'fixing him'. He

wasn't the failed husband who couldn't support his wife during the lowest point of their lives, he wasn't the once-detective who'd been so devastated by his grief that his captain had had no choice but to gracefully let him go, he wasn't the father who had sped up his daughter's death by insisting on an experimental treatment that only made her worse. He was just a guy with a beautiful woman coming onto him and for a few moments, he could pretend. But when it was all over, he remembered and it all came flooding back, knocking the wind out of him and throwing him on his ass. And then he'd hate himself even more for trying to forget, trying to pretend. He deserved the pain and he hated himself for trying to wiggle his way around it.

But it'd been different with Joyce. Much different. They'd dated for a bit in high school and while things had ended on relatively decent terms, he hated the fact she'd gotten together with Lonnie after him. He knew he wasn't right for her but she hadn't wanted to listen. Years later, they're commiserating about life and he finds himself confessing the personal details of his former life over his third shot of whiskey. Dead daughter. Divorced wife.

She didn't deserve this. Lonnie had done enough to make her life hell lately and here he comes along and drags her down into the little cesspool he'd created for himself to drown in. The only consolation was that the kids weren't home. Maybe that would've made things better. Maybe he and Joyce wouldn't have hooked up knowing her kids were sleeping in the next room. Maybe they still would have and he would've hated himself more. He couldn't be sure.

How did he get to this point? Sitting in his new, yet old, police chief's SUV and staring at Joyce Byers' rancher in the middle of the night, his internal demons eating away at him like buzzards.

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"There's a high wind in the trees, a cold sound in the air. And nobody ever knows when you go and where do you start? Oh, into the dark..."

40. I'll Be There

[A/N: Hey all! I'm so sorry for taking so long to update... a lot's been going on. I was in a car accident, my hand's been a brace, it's been great -_- lol but I'm back! This chapter is on the shorter side but I wanted to give you guys something while I get back into the groove of writing. Let me know what you think and that you're still digging everything and all that.

ALSO, THE NEW TRAILER... AHHHHH. I am so excited for October XD]

Chapter 40: I'll Be There (by Jackson 5)

"I'll reach out my hand to you, I'll have faith in all you do. Just call my name and I'll be there..."

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Mike arrived at the Byers house about thirty minutes later. He'd managed to sneak out without his mom noticing but the timing had needed to be perfect. As she was giving Holly her bath and getting her ready for bed, Mike knew he could leave through the basement door undetected. He'd spent the whole bike ride thinking about how El must be feeling right now. Knowing what had been going on earlier, it now made sense that he hadn't been able to reach anyone at home when he'd called. He still wanted to have a conversation with her about his "feelings" and "crushes" but it was obviously not the right time for that. The topic was likely to be difficult and awkward so it was probably better that he postpone it for now. There were more important things to worry about.

"Hey Will!" Mike greeted his friend happily, rushing over to hug his friend as Joyce ushered him inside.

"Hey Mike," Will smiled from the couch, still tucked under the blanket his mom had wrapped around him. "El's in my mom's room," He nodded behind him.

"Okay," Mike nodded his understanding as he shifted his backpack on

his shoulder. "Is everything okay with you? Why are you home already?"

"I don't exactly know," Will looked to his mom who didn't offer any sort of explanation. "But yeah, I'm fine," He shrugged casually.

"Alright," Joyce said, stepping into the conversation and diverting it away from what could possibly get the boys worried. The last thing they needed was the boys to get worked up into a frenzy because of her and Hopper's suspicions about the lab. Hopper had just left a few minutes ago so she expected he'd update her in the morning after his shift at the lab. In the meantime, keeping things running smoothly at home was her priority. At least, as smooth as they could be with a grieving, telekinetic preteen having meltdowns in her house. "Mike, do you wanna see El? I think she'd like to know you're here,"

"Yeah!" He nodded, replying a little too eagerly but no one paid it any mind. He darted a glance back at Will who was still on the couch and before he could say anything, the boy responded.

"It's cool," He smiled softly. "I'll be here,"

Mike nodded his understanding, then looked back at Joyce who gestured for him to head back to the bedrooms. As he approached the hallway, he saw the state of the kitchen and shot a concerned look back at Joyce.

"It's fine," She waved, shaking her head. "El got upset and well..."

Mike pursed his lips, nodding. "Got it,"

Jonathan was leaving the room as Mike approached the door. "Hey Mike," the older teen greeted. "Your sister's in there with her but you can go in,"

"Nancy's here?" Mike's face contorted with confusion and surprise which caught Jonathan off-guard. He hadn't realized that Mike didn't know Nancy was already here but then again, why would he?

"Uh, yeah," He replied, narrowly avoiding his involvement in Nancy's presence. "She's been comforting El but I know she wants to see you,"

"Okay, thanks," Mike replied, hesitating briefly as his hand hung over the doorknob and Jonathan went into the kitchen to straighten up. Mike knocked softly, tentatively pushing the cracked door open slowly until he heard Nancy's voice.

"It's open,"

As soon as El saw Mike, her face brightened and he reflexively grinned before noticing her tear-stained cheeks and the puffiness around her eyes. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed, leaning over a crudely drawn picture with an assortment of crayons at her feet as Nancy sat next to her. She appeared to be a lot calmer than he had anticipated her being but judging by her face and the state of the kitchen, he assumed he had missed the worst of it all.

"Mike," El's voice was light with relief as he entered the room, pulled his backpack off his shoulder and plopping it on the other end of the bed. El scooted back, pushing her drawing and crayons aside, then pulled her knees to her chest. She wrapped her arms around them and watched Mike walk around the edge of the bed.

"Hey El," He said gently. "I heard about Becky... I'm really sorry,"

El pursed her lips, her eyes shimmering with unfallen tears as she tucked her chin in the crook of her crossed arms. The two were quiet and Nancy glanced back and forth at them. Silence wasn't a surprise on El's part but Mike seemed a little more awkward than normal. He could deny it all he wanted but Nancy didn't believe for a second that he didn't like this girl.

Sensing the need for some temporary privacy, Nancy moved to get off the bed. "I'm gonna go out to the living room for a little while," She touched El's shoulder reassuringly. "That okay? If you need anything, just yell,"

El nodded, looking at Nancy and expressing her gratitude solely with her eyes as the teen stepped out.

Now alone, Mike's gaze fell to the bedspread and his backpack. He wasn't sure what to say or do and his mind swam with a million different thoughts at once.

"I uh, brought some stuff," He said, abruptly breaking the silence as he grabbed his backpack and rifled through its contents. "Um, let's see... comic books... there's this puzzle book that has mazes and crosswords and stuff like that in it... I dunno," He tossed the book onto the bed and El watched him with fascination. "Uh... what else..." He said, hyperfocused on his bag. "Jolly Ranchers and some chocolate I had leftover from Christmas but I don't know if it's still good or not... umm... oh, I brought this," He pulled a small Yoda figurine out of the bag and shrugged. "Since I think you like Star Wars now... I dunno, it's dumb," He paused but El shook her head.

"Not dumb," She said softly and he met her gaze, the frenzied nerves within him calming with that eye contact alone.

"I wanted to bring stuff you might like," He shrugged, fidgeting with the pages of one of the comics spread over the mattress. "I know it won't make everything better but I dunno... Sometimes people like to have stuff to take their mind off of the bad things that happen so I just threw this stuff in my bag and..." He trailed off, feeling awkward again. "Uh... yeah,"

A small smile traced El's lips and she reached one hand out to the colorful bag of Jolly Ranchers, unwrapping a red one and blinking in surprise at the sudden burst of flavor.

"Can I uh... Can I sit with you?" Mike asked and El nodded, scooting over so he had room to come up and avoid the pile of stuff he'd unceremoniously strewn over the bedspread. They were quiet for a minute, El savoring the flavorful candy in her mouth and Mike trying desperately to figure out what to say. He remembered how he felt when they thought Will died. There wasn't really anything that could be said to make it not hurt but his mom had assured him that he'd get through it and she was there for him. Maybe that was the best he could offer El.

"Uh, El, I..." He started, his voice soft and honest. "I think I kind of know how you're feeling right now and I just... I just want you to know that I'm here for you... I don't really know what else to say but... um, I'm here if you need anything,"

El glanced over at him, her smile just barely meeting her eyes but

causing them to twinkle nonetheless. "Thank you," She said softly.

"I mean, do you need anything?" He continued, transitioning into fix-it mode. He needed some idea of what to do. "Do you wanna talk or anything?"

El pondered this for a moment, her gaze falling as she got lost in her thoughts. Mike took this to mean she didn't have anything to say until she spoke a couple minutes later.

"I'm... scared," She said, her voice barely a whisper. "And sad,"

Listening to her, hearing the pain in her voice and seeing it in her face was heartbreaking for Mike. He wished so badly that he could make things okay for her and protect her from all the bad things she was feeling and experiencing but he couldn't. It made him feel helpless. "I know... I'm sorry,"

"Why?" She asked, looking up at him curiously. "Not your fault,"

"I know," He replied. "I just mean, like, I'm sorry you're feeling this way. It's what you say when something happens and you wish it didn't because you don't want the other person to be hurting,"

"Oh," El said, soaking in this information. It would be some time before she was more familiar with colloquialisms. "I can't find her... my... mom." Her voice wavered as her eyes filled with tears yet again.

"Find her?" Mike asked, scooting closer in an effort to comfort her but not entirely sure what to do with his arms or hands so he settled for proximity. "Like how you found Will?"

El nodded, continuing in slow, punctuated sentences. "I always find her. We talk. Now, I can't," A few tears escaped and slid down her tears, eliciting a pang of sympathy in Mike's chest.

"They don't know where she is?" Mike asked and El shook her head, sniffing. "Well, maybe she's still around somewhere and she's okay. Or she went out of range or something. Or maybe you're just tired and you could try again later and find her. You're probably really tired; crying takes a lot out of you,"

El inhaled deeply, exhaling in a sigh. Maybe he was right. She could barely think straight; it shouldn't surprise her that she couldn't find her mother in the darkness right now. Her powers were all over the place - waxing and waning in strength and intensity with the ebb and flow of her emotions and energy.

Mike sat patiently watching her. He didn't consider himself the most skilled person at comforting someone in this situation so he was flying a little blind in terms of knowing what to do. Relying on his instincts and the things that helped him when he was upset seemed to be the way to go, though. His gaze fell to the drawing El had been working on when he came in and he leaned forward to reach it and pull it over to them. "You drew this?"

El looked at the drawing in his hands and nodded. "Will... gave me paper, and crayons," She explained.

Mike studied the image. Her art skills were certainly not anything close to Will's level but he could tell she'd put a lot of herself into the drawing. Two stick figure women stood in front of a small house with a smaller girl figure between them. He recognized Becky's curly hair and could only assume the other woman was Terry, El's mom. There were dark, ominous clouds around the perimeter of the page but directly surrounding the house and people were rays of sunshine and the faces of the people had wide smiles, their stick arms connecting as though holding hands. In that moment, he was struck with the significance of the drawing. She'd felt safe with her family. Those dark clouds around them had to mean something, as well as the invisible bubble of sunshine that separated the dark from the light.

"It's really good, El," Mike said solemnly, carefully passing the drawing to her and she adjusted her legs to sit cross-legged again. She stared down at the drawing in her lap, then without warning shifted her body and leaned her head against Mike's shoulder. For a moment, he was frozen in place. He didn't want to move and disturb her or make her think what she was doing wasn't okay but the thrill of her contact made him antsy.

"Do you wanna keep drawing?" Mike asked and El shook her head against his shoulder.

"No,"

He paused, glancing down at her as she continued to stare at the family she'd drawn. "What do you wanna do?"

"Sit," El breathed, snaking her right arm around his so she could be closer and more comfortable - an action that, unbeknownst to her, made Mike's heart skip a beat.

"O-Okay," He squeaked, recovering quickly. "We can do that," He said, tossing around the idea of putting his arm around her but the message never quite left his brain and reached his arm so he continued to sit stock still. From his vantage point, he could only really see the top of her head unless she looked up and he noticed the way her hair had grown over the past few months. Not to any substantial length but he could tell it was getting longer and he briefly wondered what she would look like with long hair. He'd seen her with the wig but that was obviously not what she would look like with her own hair at that length. He was anything but knowledgeable about hair and things like that but he was pretty sure her real hair wasn't blonde.

They stayed like that for a while until Nancy returned to the room and Mike fought away his blush at having his sister see El so affectionately clinging to him.

"Hey, sorry El but Mike and I have to get home," She said apologetically, their close proximity and Mike's bashful expression not going unnoticed. "Apparently Mike didn't tell Mom he was leaving and now she's having a conniption," She shot a pointed look at her brother who grimaced, reluctantly slinking away from El and off the bed.

"I didn't want her to say I couldn't come over because it was after dark," He weakly explained. "I didn't think she'd notice..."

"Well, have fun explaining that to her when we get home," Nancy retorted. "I told her what happened though and she was more concerned about that but still, Mike, you know how she's been since Will came back,"

"I know..." Mike sighed, then looked at El who was cuddling a pillow now that Mike's arm was no longer nearby. "I'll leave this stuff here with you in case you want any of it, okay?" He gestured to the items from his backpack that were still haphazardly spread out over the bed and El nodded.

"Okay, well," Mike said, kicking his feet. "I'll come and see you tomorrow,"

"Assuming you aren't grounded for sneaking out," Nancy chimed in, earning a glare from Mike as he started to walk around the bed to leave.

"Mike," El called his attention and he stopped in his tracks as she got up on her knees, scooting to the edge of the bed and wrapping her arms around him in a hug. Mike did his best to ignore his sister's smirk as he reciprocated El's hug, another blush creeping up his neck and turning the tips of his ears pink.

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Jonathan gave Nancy and Mike a ride back home with Mike's bike squeezed into the trunk of his car. The ride itself was uneventful but as they pulled up to the house and Mike got out to retrieve his bike from the trunk, he noticed Jonathan and Nancy lean across the center console for a brief kiss.

"Gross..."

Pretending he didn't see anything, he settled his bike on the pavement and closed the trunk, walking around the side of the car where Nancy was getting out of the passenger seat.

"See you guys," Jonathan said, leaning forward and Mike waved, keeping his smirk contained until he and Nancy were almost to the front door.

"So are you two dating now?" Mike asked slyly, resting his bike against the house.

"What?" Nancy startled, then narrowed her eyes at her little brother's smirk. "Are you dating *Eleven*?" She countered and Mike's grin

immediately morphed into a blank stare, then an exasperated look of denial.

"What? No!" He replied, a little too adamantly.

"Right," Nancy quirked an eyebrow, unconvinced. "So much for telling each other everything," She laughed to herself.

"So you *are* dating Jonathan now," Mike said, happily jumping out of the hot seat and putting the spotlight back on her.

"I..." She contemplated not telling him anything at all but after everything that happened tonight, she didn't have the energy. Besides, why should she? "I think so,"

"Hmm," Mike nodded. "Okay,"

Nancy fished her keys out of her purse and stuck the house key in the lock. "Get ready," She warned and Mike braced himself for his mom's anxiety-riddled lecture.

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"I'll be there to comfort you, build my world of dreams around you. I'm so glad that I found you..."

41. Talking In Your Sleep

Chapter 41: Talking in Your Sleep (by The Romantics)

"When you close your eyes and go to sleep, and it's down to the sound of a heartbeat. I can hear the things that you're dreaming about when you open up your heart and the truth comes out..."

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They would have been able to have a more elaborate talk had Mike not been sitting in the backseat of the car. Both Jonathan and Nancy had a million things running through their minds as the night came to a close. As the craziness of the situation with El calmed for now, they were able to remember just how incredible their time together up to that point had been.

"So..." Nancy said once Mike was out of the car, her cheeks pinkening as she looked down.

"So," Jonathan nodded, equally nervous after what had transpired between them earlier that day.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow?" Nancy looked up, meeting his gaze and finding it impossible to subdue her smile.

"Yeah," Jonathan grinned, his eyes settling briefly on her lips but it was enough for her to pick up on and lean forward a bit. Taking the hint, he leaned in as well, leaving a chaste but sweet kiss on her lips before settling back into his seat.

He watched her cheeks turn an even deeper shade of pink, more noticeable in the light from the streetlamp, and the apples of her cheeks became more pronounced with her bashful grin. "I should go," She murmured, her unceasing smile having an infectious effect on him.

"Yeah," He breathed with a hint of disappointment. "Goodnight,"

Nancy unlocked her door and put one foot out of the car just as Mike slammed the trunk closed. "Night," She glanced at Jonathan once

more and finally got out, purposefully ignoring her brother's looks. She could read it in his face that it would only be a matter of seconds before he was giving her a hard time about her lingering moment with Jonathan.

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It had been a while since he'd seen that place - the dark, damp wasteland that took his breath away like a soul sucking demon. The floating white particles that made the idea of snowfall a little more menacing now. The threat of danger lurking behind every corner and never quite knowing when you were finally safe after running so long your legs felt like they could give out at any moment.

He hadn't slipped into the Upside Down in weeks and with the slugs gone, he thought he could escape the horror of that world but there was nothing to shield him from the vivid memories his brain harbored and the chills he experienced when he closed his eyes and saw the decay and sludge that dripped from every surface.

He woke up in a cold sweat, his hair slicked to his forehead as he panted. His eyes wide and bloodshot, he looked around the living room. He was still on the couch, wrapped in the blanket Joyce had given him. The clock on the wall read 4:23 and the streetlights were still on outside, casting a soft glow through the curtains and across the living room. Joyce lay asleep in the armchair by the couch, her hair disheveled and her mouth slightly agape as a soft snore escaped her.

Suddenly, as his breath steadied, the world around him flashed and the warm, soft glow from the light outside turned to a harsh, cold, blue light that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. Those white particles floated past his face and he shivered in the cold, clutching the blanket to him though it was now covered in dark brown slime. Was this another dream? Or was he slipping into the Upside Down again? Why was this happening? He had to figure it out.

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he tossed the blanket off of his legs and sat up on the couch. His bare feet stepped in cold, wet sludge on the floor and he grimaced at the sensation but stood up

nonetheless.

The Demogorgon was gone. He didn't need to worry about that. And he'd seen this place many times since he'd initially been trapped here before. He didn't need to be afraid. That's what he told himself at least and it seemed to take the edge off of his anxiety. He crept through this rotting version of his house, trying not to relive memories of being trapped in this place and begging his mom to hear him as he called out her name, then Jonathan's, then El's.

He was alone in this house and the silence was deafening as he cautiously padded his way down the hall.

"Mom?" He called out again, approaching her bedroom door. Vines lined the baseboards and wrapped themselves around the door handle, leaving the door slightly ajar. He tentatively pushed at the wooden door, the moisture in the air leaving it feeling damp and cold. Taking a breath, he stepped through the threshold into the room. He didn't expect to find anyone necessarily and he was beginning to calm himself down as he went. In his mind, he reminded himself that he always came back and this could all very well be a dream. "Can anybody hear me?"

Like a flash of light, Will was home, standing a foot away from El's blank expression. The room was warm, the light from the lamp on the end table was soft and El stood face to face with him, per puzzled yet concerned face eyeing him closely.

Suddenly everything made sense. He wasn't scared anymore. He was getting used to this, unpleasant as it was.

"El, I figured it out!" He exclaimed in a hushed voice, trying not to be too loud given the late hour. "I know why I keep going in and out of the Upside Down!"

El looked at him expectantly, the skin under her eyes puffy and he felt a brief pinch of guilt. Had he woken her up? Was she already awake when he appeared in the room?

"Well, not really *why* but *how*, I think," He clarified, crossing the room and plopping down on the bed as El watched with interest, still half-

asleep. "Every time I've slipped into the Upside Down, something crazy has usually been going on like throwing up slugs or trespassing at the lab. I think maybe it's connected to me being worried or scared, or freaked out, I guess. Does that make sense?"

El gave a small shrug, then nodded her agreement. "Makes sense,"

"I was having this dream," Will continued, still processing his new revelation with wild eyes. "I was in that place and it was like before, with the Demogorgon, and I didn't know if I'd ever escape or if that thing was going to eat me or what. I woke up and everything was normal but then all of a sudden I was *actually* in the Upside Down again but it wasn't a dream - I don't *think*. But then I came back and I think it was because I started to calm down!" He looked up at El for some sort of exclamation or reaction but she was particularly stoic when she was tired, apparently. "I'm sorry; did I wake you up?"

"Heard you yelling," She replied and Will did a double-take.

"You *heard* me?" He repeated. "Like, before I came back?" El nodded and Will's eyebrows shot up. "Wow, I didn't think anyone could hear me. I guess you used your powers?"

El shrugged as a yawn escaped her and she pawed at her eyes.

"Wow..." Will breathed in amazement at all of these realizations.

"What are you guys doing up?" Jonathan suddenly appeared in the doorway, his shaggy hair sticking up in various directions and his eyelids heavy with sleep. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," Will nodded emphatically. "Yeah, everything's fine. Sorry, Jonathan,"

"Mhm," Jonathan mumbled before plodding across the hall back to his own room.

"I'll tell him in the morning," Will said to El and her questioning expression. Even if she didn't say much, she communicated everything she was thinking with her face and given Will's recent history of keeping his interdimensional illness a secret, he knew she was questioning his judgment in that moment. "Don't worry," He

added, standing up. "I'm gonna go back to the couch though. Sorry I woke you up,"

"It's okay," El replied with a small smile as Will left the room and headed back to the couch, carefully tip-toeing past Joyce in the armchair so as not to wake her up.

As Will settled back onto the couch, his mind swimming with thoughts and revelations, he found it hard to fall back asleep until the sun was already peeking over the horizon outside.

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Much to Mike's relief, Karen didn't go as hard on him as he had anticipated. He'd sat through a half hour lecture on letting her know where he was and the importance of doing so but she'd been more concerned with how El was doing and if she or anyone else needed anything. Thank goodness for Nancy filling their mom in on the reason he snuck out.

He'd fallen asleep around midnight with the ever-present glow of the moon shining through his window and illuminating the edges of everything in his room like a nightlight. His mind was focused on El and the current circumstances surrounding her family, making it difficult for him to relax enough to fall asleep. When he finally did, she was still there.

"El?" Mike said, tentatively approaching the young girl as they stood outside her aunt's home on a sunny afternoon.

El reached a hand out to him and he offered his to her without question. She led him across the lawn and to a table and chairs on the porch. The grass was dead and frostbitten, the trees bare, making it feel more like a memory than a dream. Or like it was actually happening.

"Why are we here?" Mike asked, taking a seat in one of the plastic chairs as El pulled her feet up on her chair and clutched her knees to her chest.

"I miss them," El replied, her voice muffled by her arms and knees in

front of her mouth. "I want..." She lifted her head and looked up wistfully at the house. Even without going inside, Mike could feel that it was empty. "I want to find them,"

"I know..." Mike said sympathetically. "I wish there was something I could do... Maybe I can help find your mom?"

El shrugged, her eyes glistening with the threat of tears as she glanced down at her lap. She wished she had the words for everything she was thinking and feeling. The irony of having control of dreams in such a way that she can communicate with another person yet be incapable of forcibly producing her aunt or her mother's image. Even if it wasn't real, even if it was only a memory and she couldn't talk to them in real time, why couldn't she bring herself to *create* a dream like that?

"Don't cry, El," Mike said softly, reaching across the table and touching her arm. She hadn't realized her tears had escaped. "I promise we'll find your mom. She wasn't in the accident so she's gotta be around somewhere. We found Will and look at how crazy and impossible that seemed. We'll find her, okay?"

El bit her lip, looking up at him with tears in her eyes.

"Do you trust me?" Mike asked, his eye contact steadfast and his voice comforting her like no one else.

El blinked back her tears and nodded, offering him a small smile. "I... trust you,"

The corner of Mike's mouth turned up reflexively in a half-smile and his eyes twinkled at her affirmation. "Good," He nodded, satisfied and suddenly feeling bashful at the way she was smiling at him. "I-I'm glad,"

Suddenly El sat upright, her brow furrowed with confusion as she listened for something. Mike watched as she put her feet back down on the porch and looked around, then focused intently on nothing in particular.

"What is it?" He asked. "What's going on?"

"Hear something," El replied distantly, still trying to make out the distant voice in her head. "Will,"

Mike blinked curiously. "Will? What's he saying? What do you hear?"

El shook her head. "Not sure," She stood up and Mike mirrored her movements. "Gotta see,"

"Um, okay," Mike said uncertainly. "Should I be worried? Is everything okay?"

El shrugged and shook her head. "Gotta go now,"

"Okay, well, um," Mike stammered. They were less than a foot away from each other and he didn't want to leave her or have her leave or whatever was going to happen in this strange dream connection they had. He wanted to sit with her and hug her and just... be *near* her, even if it was only in their minds. "I'll talk to you later, then, I guess,"

El nodded, offering him another small smile as she stepped even closer to him, an action which flustered him a bit. "Yes," Her smile widened and she wrapped her arms around him, nestling her head against his shoulder and for a moment, Mike felt like his brain had disconnected communication to his arms. After a couple seconds, he brought his arms around her and hugged her back, all the while feeling like an immense electrical current was running through his limbs.

El pulled back and looked at him, the eye contact making Mike mildly uncomfortable, though he couldn't look away. "Night, Mike,"

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There was no way he was getting any sleep tonight...or this morning. With the sun creeping over the horizon, Hopper made his way back to his truck, still doing everything in his power to keep what he knew under wraps. The rollercoaster of emotions, insights, and revelations he'd experienced in the past twelve hours likely would have had a more intense impact if he weren't so tired. For now, he felt numb yet focused and as he drove away from the lab with dawn on his heels, he brainstormed how he would handle this incredibly delicate

situation.

By the time he'd left the Byers' he knew Becky's body would be on its way to the county coroner's office. The medical examiner had just barely gotten her body situated in one of the exam rooms by the time Hopper arrived, flashing his badge at the receptionist and finding his way down the hall. In a small town like Clarksville, it wasn't too easy to get lost in buildings like this. Most were one level with a clear indication of which corridors led to what. He'd run into the medical examiner on his way to begin assessing Becky's body and upon informing him that Hopper knew her and could personally identify her for him for procedure's sake, he was escorted to the exam room.

"I haven't begun the autopsy but I suspect blunt force trauma, given the nature of the accident," The coroner said as the two men entered the sterile room. There was a huge stainless steel case with drawer handles that lined half of a wall from floor to eye-level, likely holding who knows how many other bodies. A counter lined the perimeter of the room with countless medical instruments and tools that Hopper couldn't begin to identify. In the center of the room was a metal table with the form of a body on top, draped with a white sheet. He knew Becky was under that sheet and he felt like he'd been hit in the gut.

"I appreciate you coming all this way, Chief," The coroner said respectfully as he walked over to the table as though he were leading someone to something quaint and mundane like an art exhibit or a jewelry case, not the dead body of someone you'd known personally. "But I don't anticipate any surprises with this case. I inspected the body back at the crash site and her injuries appear to match up with an accident like that,"

"Just... show me the body," Hopper said gruffly, his brow furrowed as he stared at the sheet, imagining Becky, the real, *alive* Becky, asleep under it. He glanced up at the coroner and for good measure, added, "Please,"

The coroner nodded respectfully, pulling away at the head of the sheet to reveal Becky's cold, pale face. He hadn't had the chance yet to clean her up in preparation for the autopsy so blood was still caked at her scalp and her face was covered with tiny cuts and bruises, her wavy brown hair disheveled and unruly.

Hopper inhaled deeply, seeking into his feet as he studied Becky's face. How strange it was to see the snarky, upbeat woman's face so pallid and vacant. He peeled his eyes away from her closed eyelids, scrutinizing her hair, the peaks and dips of her face, the edge of her jawline and the thin curve of her neck as the coroner stood by, close but respectfully quiet. It was then that Hopper noticed something strange on the side of her neck, something he easily missed at the scene. A small circular dot along the side of her neck, smudged with dirt and grime. Under the watchful eye of the coroner, he feigned an affectionate brush of his fingers and smeared away the excess debris, revealing a tiny hole the size of a pin in her neck. He could have so easily missed it!

"Yes, it's her," Hopper said evenly, his poker-face impeccable. "Rebecca Ives,"

The coroner nodded, replacing the sheet as Hopper stared at the hole one last time. "I'm sorry for your loss, Chief,"

"Thanks," Hopper replied in a mumble, replacing his hat to his head. "Let me know your findings when the autopsy's done,"

"Of course," The coroner said, still certain that he already knew the cause of Becky's death.

As Hopper returned to his vehicle, a slew of realizations pelted him like hail. He'd spent enough time as a detective in the city to have seen a variety of different situations, specifically involving homicide victims. He'd spent enough time in medical examiners' offices to recognize certain things. What he'd seen in there had a striking resemblance to an injection hole, much like the one he'd received after getting caught in the lab. He'd been lucky - he'd been drugged and dropped off at home to work off his stupor. It appeared Becky hadn't had the same good fortune. He didn't know what they'd injected her with but he was willing to place money on the fact that someone, probably from the lab, had killed Becky and set up that accident scene. Much the same way as they'd put together Benny Hammond's suicide scene. This changed everything, though it didn't surprise him. The lab had killed Becky and if that was the case, they probably had something to do with Terry's disappearance as well. And in that same vein, if they were suddenly concerned about Becky

and Terry, perhaps they knew that El was no longer in the Upside Down.

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El woke up early that morning to the sound of stressed voices coming from the living room. Yawning and stretching across the length of Joyce's bed, she shook the blanket off her and padded out of the room.

Hopper, Joyce, Will, and Jonathan were in the living room and everyone briefly quieted when El rounded the corner. Hopper was still dressed in the previous day's clothes and the other three were still in their sleep clothes, their hair bedraggled and their faces tired but concerned. Joyce was clutching a coffee mug in one hand with a lit cigarette between her fingers as she stood by Hopper.

"Morning sweetie," Joyce tried to keep her voice light but El wasn't fooled.

"What's wrong?" She asked, furrowing her brow and looking between the four of them.

Hopper glanced at Joyce but decided the best thing right now was to be direct. They didn't have time to pussyfoot around things right now. "I went to see Becky last night," He said, crouching down in front of El so the two of them were eye-level. "She didn't die from the car accident, El," He searched her face for some sort of reaction, bracing himself for another destructive outburst. "The lab got to her and I think they know about you, too,"

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"When I hold you in my arms at night, don't you know you're sleeping in a spotlight. And all your dreams that you keep inside, you're telling me the secrets that you just can't hide..."

42. Open Arms

Chapter 42: Open Arms (by Journey)

"So now I come to you with open arms. Nothing to hide, believe what I say..."

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The voices around her seemed to quiet, become distant, as El's mind swirled like the chaos of a hurricane. She thought of Becky, of her mom, and her heart felt like it was disintegrating in her chest. She thought of the lab - faceless men in white that would do anything at her Papa's orders and the well-dressed men and women that could hide venom behind smiles that never reached their eyes. She felt like everything was on fire - her arms, her hands, her face burned with rage as her chest caved in from the weight of the information she was processing.

They'd killed her family. They'd killed Becky and maybe her mom? She didn't know what to think of Terry's disappearance other than to assume she may be dead as well which only fueled the destruction boiling inside her. And if the lab was to blame, then Becky's drinking was probably not. How strange it felt to have one weight lifted and replaced with another, heavier one.

Everyone was still staring at her, speaking words she wasn't hearing, wasn't listening to. She was fluctuating between devastation and fury and she didn't know whether to scream or cry or tear the entire house down in a grief-fueled frenzy.

As a single tear escaped her and she pawed it away, her brow set with determination and she headed confidently for the front door.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Hopper said, stepping in front of her and blocking her way as she looked up at him defiantly. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Kill them," El said in a low tone, her voice dripping with the need for vengeance.

Everyone's eyes widened a bit at that but somehow Hopper was unfazed. "Not yet," He said sternly, but he crouched down to meet the frustrated girl at eye-level. "We'll get them - they *will* pay for what they did to Becky and if they've done anything to Terry, they'll pay for that, too. I promise you that," Her gaze softened slightly as their eye contact remained steady. "But you can't just go marching up there like some kind of half-cocked cowboy, do you understand?" El paused, slightly confused at the reference but she didn't care to ask right now. She had more important things on her mind. "They *want* you to come back there and go after whatever kind of justice you think you're gonna get right now and believe me, I have no doubt you could take them all down in a second if you wanted to but if we're gonna do this, we're gonna do this carefully. Which means, *you* are going somewhere safe for the time being - *that* is top priority and I don't want to hear any arguments about that," He matched her determined stare with an intimidating one of his own. "Do you understand?"

El stared at him for a moment, glancing back at Joyce, Jonathan, and Will who were watching the intense interaction with wide eyes. She exhaled sharply, her shoulders deflating as she gave a reluctant nod.

"I meant what I said," Hopper said a little more gently but with a sense of authority that made it hard to hold onto doubt. He gripped her shoulders for emphasis as he maintained eye contact with her. "We *will* make them pay and they will never have a hold on you ever again, alright? But you need to trust me,"

El pursed her lips, her adrenaline ebbing and making her feel more tired and weighed down by the more heartbroken side of her emotions. She nodded, her eyes filling with tears as the undertow of her devastation swept her back like a wave at sea and she suddenly couldn't breathe. It was like the wind was knocked out of her and all she could feel now that her anger had been somewhat defused was the intense pain of loss that wracked every corner of her heart. She exhaled sharply, her eyes glistening as she stood in front of the chief.

"C'mere," Hopper said simply, gently, as he pulled her toward him and wrapped her in a comforting hug. Her shoulders shook as she began to cry, burying her face in the shoulder of his shirt as Hopper and Joyce exchanged doleful glances.

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It had taken quite a bit of arguing but Joyce had eventually convinced Jonathan to go to school. He'd wanted to stay home and help with whatever plan they needed to come up with but Joyce had insisted he not miss any more time in his senior year. That, plus Hopper's comment about keeping up regular appearances so as to not make the lab suspicious, was enough to send Jonathan on his way, albeit begrudgingly. It wasn't false, though; with the lab having eyes and ears all over Hawkins, it wouldn't be beyond them to take note of any unusual behavior amongst the people already associated with El.

Will and El quietly watched a movie in the living room. Joyce had put a Disney movie on in the hope they could have a few hours of peace before going into action mode regarding El's whereabouts. While they watched, she made breakfast in the kitchen as Hopper brought her up to speed on everything he knew.

"Why don't you let me do that," Hopper said, hovering behind Joyce as she stood at the counter cracking eggs into a bowl. "You just had surgery; you shouldn't be doing all this,"

Joyce looked over her shoulder at him with an amused expression. "I'm fine, Hop," She insisted with a grin. "And I didn't *just* have surgery - it was a week ago,"

"And you're supposed to be *recovering* for *four to six* weeks," Hopper countered pointedly. "Or do you wanna put yourself back in the hospital?"

"Hopper," Joyce turned around and gave him a pointed look of her own, though her smirk never disappeared. "I appreciate your concern but I can make breakfast," She lifted her eyebrows, waiting for him to argue some more but to her surprise, he backed down and stepped away. "So what are we gonna do about El?"

"I know you wanted to keep her, Joyce, but we've gotta find another place," Hopper said, standing a few feet away as Joyce pushed eggs around in a pan on the stove. "If they knew about Becky and Terry, it's only a matter of time before they figure out she's with us - if they haven't already,"

Joyce glanced back at the living room. "I know, I just," She exhaled. "Ugh, I just hate this, Hop. She-she doesn't deserve this - she's just a little girl,"

"I know," Hopper agreed empathetically. "Do you know of anyone out of town that she could stay with for a while? Anyone you *trust*?"

Joyce sighed, pausing to think as the eggs became solid in the pan. "I... no, not really," She shook her head as she turned the burner off and set the pan on an unused burner. "My parents are out of state now, just like yours," She said, grabbing a bottle of Shake n' Pour and adding water to it before shaking it vigorously. "I've got girlfriends but... I don't think that would work," She opened the cap to check that the ready-made pancake batter was free of lumps. "Ha," She scoffed to herself. "The only person near enough but far away enough is Lonnie and there is *no way in hell*..."

"Obviously," Hopper nodded.

"I mean, do you know of anyone?" Joyce asked as she poured vegetable oil on a skillet and allowed it to heat up. "You seem to have all these connections, don't you?"

Hopper paced behind her, wracking his brain for ideas. "I know a guy down in Finksburg but I haven't seen him in years," He watched as the pancake batter Joyce had poured on the large square skillet began to form three decently-sized pancakes. Bubbles quickly spread across the top of each as a brown tinge appeared on the bottom edges. "I'm gonna look into it but we can't just send her with anyone,"

"What about her friends in Clarksville?" Joyce asked as she delicately flipped each pancake, some of which didn't fall so gracefully back onto the pan and left batter smeared across the skillet. "She's been to their houses before, hasn't she?"

Hopper stopped his pacing and shrugged. "I guess so, I'm not sure," He shook his head, his face scrunching up with discernment. "But here's the thing: the lab already knows something is up in Clarksville. I mean, they took out Becky and who knows what they did with Terry,"

"Do they know about her friends?" Joyce inquired, checking the underside of the pancakes to see if they were done yet.

"That I don't know," Hopper admitted as he took a seat at the kitchen table. "I was all over that place last night, Joyce," He sighed. "I checked every room and hallway I could get access to without running into some pimple-faced researcher wanting to ask questions. If they have Terry, I don't know where she is but I'm still not convinced she isn't somewhere in that lab,"

"You don't think -" Joyce glanced back at the living room, lowering her tone. "You don't think they killed her, too?"

Hopper shook his head slightly. "If they were gonna do that, the simplest thing would've been to put her in that car with Becky. I don't know what they're doing but they've got something else up their sleeve with Terry,"

Joyce gently slipped her spatula under each pancake, moving it to a plate next to the stove so she could make another batch. "Did you find out anything while you were there?"

Hopper leaned his elbow on the table and rubbed his forehead. "Nothing at the lab. Like I said, I checked every corner of that place I could without drawing attention and nothing. The most I got from last night is what I already told you about Becky,"

"Right, she had some sort of needle mark in her neck?" Joyce replied, flipping pancakes.

"Yeah, they injected her with something," Hopper nodded, scratching the side of his face. "With what, I don't know but we'll see if the coroner figures it out. I told him to call me with the results. I'm just waiting for him to figure out what I already know,"

Joyce sighed, listening, and the two fell into a solemn silence for several minutes as she finished one more batch of pancakes.

"Maybe we should look into the idea of El staying with her friends in Clarksville for a couple days," She said quietly. "I hate to keep moving her around but it's probably safer if she doesn't stay in one place too

long," She piled pancakes onto two plates and scoffed when she scooped the eggs from their pan. "Damn it, they're cold," She grumbled, scraping the eggs onto one of the plates and popping it into the microwave. "Let's talk to El and see what she thinks of the idea,"

Hopper exhaled and shrugged. It was their only option for the time being. It seemed like nowhere was safe at this point. The Wheeler's, the Byers', even his own home wasn't necessarily off the lab's radar. They knew she was connected to all of them so while he didn't know exactly what they knew, he felt pretty confident in his assumption that they at least knew she wasn't in the Upside Down and that her biological family had somehow gotten involved. The best thing he could do at this point was keep playing dumb and hope that bought him enough time to keep snooping around and learn as much as possible so could somehow end of all this for good.

Joyce retrieved the plate from the microwave and put individual plates of pancakes and eggs together for both Will and El, then carried them into the living room.

"Alright," She said, putting on as chipper a "mom" voice as she could muster for their sake. "Who's hungry?" She asked with a smile and Will stopped the movie as El stood up from her place on the floor by the TV set.

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Deep in the restricted corridors of the Hawkins National Laboratory, an already catatonic woman was strapped to a hospital bed, her wrists and ankles bound as the light above the bed flickered. Orderlies checked on her periodically, peeking through the window of a metal door to ensure the unconscious woman was still immobile and that the medications they'd given her were still effective. She needed another dose every few hours to keep her from waking up, to keep her brain quiet and inaccessible.

Dr. Brenner stood outside the room, peering through the glass as Agent Kramer stood alongside him.

"Our friend has been snooping around again," Agent Kramer said

calmly without taking his eyes off the slump of a woman on the other side of the glass window.

"Did he find anything?" Dr. Brenner asked flatly, his voice casual.

"No sir," Agent Kramer shook his head. "But I suspect he will eventually attempt to breach the restricted areas,"

"I'm sure of it," Dr. Brenner said with a slight nod. "He must have made the connection regarding Ms. Ives,"

"With all due respect, Dr. Brenner," Agent Kramer asked confidently but cautiously. "At what point do you intend for us to intervene?"

The white-haired man inhaled deeply, stepping away from the door and as he began to walk down the hall, the agent obediently followed. "Secure the girl first," Dr. Brenner instructed coldly. "Once Eleven has been recovered, eliminate all witnesses,"

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Mike had barely been able to sleep the night before and between his concern for El and his exhaustion, he'd trudged through the school day like a zombie. He hadn't wanted to go to school that morning but his mom had insisted with the promise that he could go see El again that afternoon. Besides, he needed to fill the guys in on everything that had happened. By the time the final bell rang and the boys retrieved their bikes from the bike rack outside, Mike felt like he was running on fumes. His eyes were bloodshot and heavy and his senses a little more dull than they should be.

"So we're goin' straight to Byers'?" Dustin clarified as he stood perched on his bike.

"Yup," Lucas nodded, then looked over at Mike who was staring at the grass in front of them in an exhausted stupor. "You ready, Mike?"

"Yeah," He replied, snapping out of it and shaking his head. "Yeah, let's go. I'm fine," He pushed off the ground with his foot and began to lead the way.

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Nancy had barely seen Jonathan all day. She'd thought at first that he hadn't come at all given everything that had happened last night but she'd seen him in the cafeteria at lunch and they'd made eye contact in the hall between classes. Both times, however, he'd somehow managed to disappear before she could get to him.

It wasn't until the last bell had rung and students were milling out of the school in pursuit of home that she saw the back of his denim jacket and the camera strap across his shoulder as he headed for the student parking lot.

"Jonathan!" She called, trotting to catch up to him as he turned around and waited for her. "Hey," She said, slightly winded as she fell into step with him.

"Hey," He replied easily as they walked up to his car and she went around to the passenger door.

Nancy quirked an eyebrow. "What's up with you? I barely saw you all day and when I did, it was like you were avoiding me,"

Jonathan's eyes widened for a moment. "I wasn't -" He looked around and sighed. "Get in,"

"No, tell me why -"

"Nancy, come on," He said with tired impatience.

Nancy reluctantly obliged and plopped into the passenger seat as he got behind the wheel. "Okay, so what is it? I know you saw me today and I thought... I dunno, we could eat lunch together or something,"

"I... was going to but you were sitting with those girls -"

"Because *you* were nowhere to be found," Nancy interjected. "I mean... if you saw me why didn't you... I dunno, come sit with me? Or at least *talk* to me? The two times I saw you today you acted weird,"

"Well, sorry, I'm just a weird guy, okay?" Jonathan snapped defensively.

"Jonathan, cut it out," Nancy admonished. "You know what I mean. I...ugh, I mean, was yesterday just a fluke because if I'm wasting my time -"

"A fluke?" Jonathan turned to her incredulously. "You think me kissing you *twice* is a fluke?"

"Why else would you avoid me all day?" She asked pointedly.

Jonathan groaned. "I just... I figured it would be easier,"

Nancy's brow furrowed in confusion. "Easier? What would be *easier*?"

"Like," Jonathan paused, collecting his thoughts as he tilted his head back against the headrest. "I dunno, maybe it would be weird for you to have all your friends see you hanging out with *Jonathan Byers* all of a sudden,"

Nancy paused, soaking in what he was saying. "Wait a minute, you think I'd be *embarrassed* to be *seen* with you? Come *on*, Jonathan, it's not like we've never been out in public together before,"

"But as a couple?" Jonathan countered, his heart rate instantly speeding up as the words flew out of his mouth faster than he could think about what he was saying.

It must have had a surprising effect on Nancy as well as she paused for a moment, her eyebrows lifted. "Is...is that what we are now?"

Jonathan shrugged, gripping the steering wheel and tapping the top with his fingers. "I dunno, do you want to be?"

"You know, if you're trying to ask me to be your girlfriend, this is a really strange way to do it," Nancy said. "You ignore me and avoid me all day -"

"I wasn't - Ugh..." He groaned, cutting her off. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I wasn't sure what you expected when we're *here*," He gestured to the school building and Nancy shook her head in frustration.

"I mean, did I misread everything that happened yesterday? Because if you're not actually interested -"

"Oh my god," Jonathan laughed loudly at that. "Are you kidding? Nancy, I've liked you since we were *kids* - it's not that,"

"You... *really*?"

Jonathan pursed his lips and his gaze fell to the steering wheel in front of him. "Yeah," He shrugged.

"Oh... okay, well..." Nancy said, processing. While she was excited and flattered to hear that he'd had feelings for her for so long, it was still surprising. "Okay, then what were you doing today?"

Jonathan sighed. "I dunno, I mean... Hopper came by again early this morning and told us some stuff about El's aunt and so that was on my mind when I got to school and then just... I dunno, I mean, you're..." He shook his head. "It's stupid,"

"No, come on, just tell me," Nancy pressed, her intrigue a bit more gentle now. "What is it?"

"You're *Nancy Wheeler*," He said, as though those words were enough to explain everything. "I'm Jonathan *Byers*. You were just dating *Steve Harrington*. Do I really need to explain how odd that shift will seem to all your friends? I'm sure you've thought about how they'd react to knowing you're dating the resident freak of Hawkins so I just didn't want to, I dunno, put you in an awkward position,"

"No, actually I haven't," Nancy said pointedly. "And I don't care, okay? Honestly, ever since Barb..." She paused, stuck in her words. "Ever since everything that happened, I don't... things at school aren't the same, okay? I don't care what anyone says or does or thinks... not anymore..." She glanced up at him. "But I *do* care if you *avoid me* all day and disappear when I try to catch up to you,"

"Okay," Jonathan sighed, looking over at her. "I get it. I'm sorry,"

"I *mean* it," Nancy said, tilting her head and though she tried to look stern, she couldn't help but smirk at the way he was looking at her. "Don't do it again. I like you and I want to hang out with you,"

Jonathan's lips widened into a grin. "Okay,"

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Despite Joyce's attempts at keeping El and Will's minds off the current dilemma with the lab, El could think of nothing else than how badly she wanted to hurt everyone at the lab for what they did to Becky. Becky was a good person, she was innocent, and the lab had taken her life away like it meant nothing. When she wasn't getting swept up by bridled anger, she was trying desperately to connect to her mom. When she and Will were watching their third Disney movie of the day, when she was washing her hands in the bathroom, when she was quietly watching Will draw in the living room - every moment was an opportunity to try and establish a connection to Terry but each time, she found only darkness. Each time she entered that place, she was alone with nothing but the echo of her own voice calling out for Terry. Each time she came back, she felt more upset than she had before, as if each failed attempt was more conclusive proof that Terry was not okay. Whether that meant she was dead or hurt, El's mind raced with the possibilities and it was enough to overwhelm her and make her wish she could disappear or sink into the couch and escape from all the bad things that seemed to follow her.

Hopper left for the police station a little while after breakfast but not before telling her that they were looking into the idea of her going to stay with one of her friend's in Clarksville and he'd be back later that afternoon. Gabby wasn't an option since she lived so close to Becky and Terry's house but maybe Trish or Emma could quietly take her in for a couple days. Hopper needed time to scope things out and he didn't want to rush into any idea without first making sure the lab wasn't already a step ahead of them. She was safe at the Byers' for now but there was no telling for how long. Without knowing the extent of the lab's knowledge of El's whereabouts and everyone else's involvement, it was hard to say if any place was truly safe.

Everything was silent in the house come mid-afternoon. Jonathan hadn't gotten home from school yet and Joyce was in the kitchen cleaning. Despite Hopper's nagging, she hated to just sit still and do nothing. She was slower than usual but movement calmed her when her nerves were frazzled. Will and El were in the living room - Will on the couch with a sketchbook in his lap and several crayons

balanced on the folds of the blanket over his legs while El was sprawled on her stomach on the floor with a crayon in hand as a much more crudely drawn creation was coming to fruition on the pages in front of her. The silence in the house was broken by a rapid knocking at the door and all three of them nearly jumped out of their skin at the sound.

Knowing Will wasn't supposed to move around much, El stood up to look through the window and see who it was but Joyce quickly came into the room and ushered her away and out of sight. After peering through the peephole and exhaling with relief, she opened the door to a trio of familiar faces.

"Hi boys," Joyce said warmly. "Come on in,"

"Hi Mrs. Byers," They all greeted politely before excitedly rushing over to El and Will.

"Dude, you're home!"

"That was so crazy,"

Following their momentary excitement at seeing Will out of the hospital, they remembered El's situation and their moods instantly turned more somber.

"I'm really sorry, El," Lucas said, patting her on the shoulder.

"Mike told us your aunt was in an accident," Dustin added heavily.

El shook her head. "Not an accident,"

"What?" Mike did a double-take. "What do you mean it wasn't an accident?"

"Bad people... the lab..." El said quietly, glaring indiscriminately at the floor. "Killed her..."

"Holy shit..." Dustin breathed, then remembered Joyce was standing right behind them. "Sorry, Mrs. Byers," He said, turning around sheepishly but Joyce gave him a mildly disapproving look since she didn't *really* care that much. There were worse things in the world

than a pre-teen using a swear word and with everything they'd been experiencing lately, a free pass wasn't that much to ask.

"So wait, what happened exactly?" Lucas asked and El looked down at the floor, her face scowling despite the recurring glistening of tears in her eyes.

Noticing her fragility, Mike jumped in, "It doesn't matter," He said. "What are we gonna do?"

"Hopper and I are working on figuring out where El's gonna go from here," Joyce chimed in. "The most important thing right now is her safety,"

"What do you mean 'where she's gonna go'?" Mike inquired, mildly anxious. "Like back to Clarksville?"

"Possibly," Joyce said. "Until we know what the lab's intentions are and what they know, we have to be very careful,"

"Man..." Lucas exhaled. "This is crazy,"

"Why don't you boys do something fun while you're here, okay?" Joyce redirected. "Play on Will's Atari or watch a movie-"

"Mom, we've watched three and a half movies already today," Will moaned, leaning his head back on the couch cushion.

"Okay, no movies," She conceded. "But I don't want you kids getting worked up over this. Once Hopper gets back we'll make some decisions but for now, just be *kids*, okay?" They didn't say anything in response so Joyce took their silence as agreement and went back to cleaning the kitchen.

.....

Even after Dustin and Lucas left to go home and have dinner at their mothers' behest later that evening, Mike stuck around. They'd finished up the latter half of a TV showing of Monty Python and the Holy Grail before spending an otherwise uneventful evening talking and having dinner as though everything was normal.

After dinner, Joyce stationed herself at the sink washing dishes until Will needed an escort to the bathroom and she had to help him stand up and carefully walk the short distance down the hall. While they were alone in the living room, Mike took the opportunity to talk to El.

"Uh, El?" He said as they sat on the floor in front of the TV, their backs against the coffee table. He darted a glance at the archway leading to the kitchen and hallway. "I wanted to talk to you about something... kind of important,"

El peeled her eyes away from the TV and looked at him, causing him to momentarily forget what he was thinking.

"Um... so, do you remember when I gave you that Valentine and uh... you asked me about um, crushing?" He managed, barely keeping his voice an even tone even whilst he attempted to speak in a hushed voice. The last thing he wanted was Will or his mom to overhear what he was saying.

El nodded. "I asked if you crushed me,"

Mike couldn't help but smirk at her misuse of the term, despite the way he could already feel a blush creeping up his neck. He was suddenly aware of how close they were sitting even though there was still plenty of space between them. "Yeah, um... I actually wanted to tell you before but there wasn't really a good time and like... I guess I could have called you on the supercom but you're not supposed to have conversations like that on the phone or, supercom I guess, whatever. You're supposed to do it in person but then everything happened with your family and I..." He trailed off, looking up at her as she stared at him with fascination. "Sorry... um... so... I guess when you asked about... *that*... uh, I didn't really know what to say. I was kind of surprised, you know? I didn't know you knew that word. I mean... you do know what 'crush' means, right?"

El nodded again. "Someone you like," She replied and Mike could feel the heat in his cheeks building. "More than a friend,"

"Right," He squeaked, darting another glance back in the direction he knew Joyce and Will would be coming at any moment. "I um... okay,

well, I just wanted to let you know that... um, I do. I mean," He paused, running a nervous hand through his muppy hair, "I like you more than a friend, like a crush," He finished, speaking so quickly El almost didn't catch what he said but she smiled and he could feel his heartbeat thumping in his chest.

"Me too," She smiled shyly and the elation he felt made him feel like he could burst. He didn't even care that his normally pale skin was tinged pink all over and he had a goofy grin that probably made him look like an idiot.

Before Mike could say or do anything else, they could hear Will and his mom coming back down the hall and their moment ended, though the nervous excitement between them lingered.

.....

"So here I am, with open arms. Hoping you'll see what your love means to me..."

43. Right Here Waiting

[A/N: Two updates in less than two days?! What witchcraft is this?! XD JK, I am feeling SUPER motivated by you guys and your lovely reviews. Ahhhh you make my heart swell. Thank you all so so much for your thoughtful and encouraging feedback. You're so nice, my heart can't take it! I wanted to respond to a few people who reviewed recently:

Ella - That means so much! Thank you! This has been my vision of season 2 since I first started hearing fan theories last year so I'm so glad you're enjoying it! ^_^

Assuming you are also Ella Holmes-Jackson, your reviews have given me so much life! lol I enjoyed every notification I got and can tell you you not only made me laugh out loud several times but also helped motivate me to get more writing done!

GeekofNature - You touched my heart! Ahhh. I even showed my fiance what you said because I was so touched. I can't tell you how humbled I am by your review and I'm so so glad that you think I am maintaining the essence of who these characters are. I love them and want to be true to them! I promise to finish it and have mapped out everything to the end so the only thing standing in my way is time and motivation and reviews like yours make me want to write more and faster so thank you!

wordsfromthefeatherquill and falltotemptationx - I am so so glad you guys are enjoying reading this! You have humbled me with your compliments and I look forward to hearing you and everyone else's reactions to what I have in store later in the story!

Resisting-Moonlight - You are such a faithful reviewer and I appreciate you so much. Glad you enjoyed the cutesy moments with our lovely couples and can't wait to see your thoughts on the rest!

You are all SO AMAZING. And I love that I am keeping you guys entertained. With that said, I wanted to let everyone know that I mapped EVERYTHING OUT from now to the end of the story! It

should be 50 chapters total and I have a song and a detailed plan for each one. I am soooo excited, guys. Stuff is gonna go downnnnn and I can't wait to see your reactions! I love this, I love you, I love Stranger Things. Now let's cut to the chase!]

Chapter 43: Right Here Waiting (by Richard Marx)

"Wherever you go, whatever you do, I will be right here waiting for you. Whatever it takes, or how my heart breaks, I will be right here waiting for you..."

.....

As Will returned to the room and settled back down on the couch, Joyce headed into the kitchen to continue with the dishes.

Not realizing a moment had just been exchanged between his two friends, Will leaned forward, careful that his mom couldn't hear him. "I wish my mom knew she didn't have to help me get around everywhere," He whispered and Mike and El turned their heads around to face him. "I *can* walk," He chuckled, pulling his throw blanket back over his legs and digging around in the couch cushions for the remote.

"She's just being a mom," Mike shrugged with a sympathetic smile. "I mean, can you blame her?"

"Yeah, not really," Will conceded with a sigh and a shrug of his shoulders. "What do you guys wanna watch?"

"Doesn't matter to me," Mike shrugged and El wordlessly turned her attention back to the TV, leaning her arms back and resting her palms on the floor to support herself against the coffee table.

After a few moments of quiet amongst them, Mike decided to mirror El's position. He wanted to hold her hand but didn't want to make a big deal of it or make it completely obvious or awkward. The fact that her hand was on the floor right next to him set his mind to racing of all the ways he could make a subtle move and close some of the space between them. With Will on the couch behind them, he didn't want whatever he did to be noticeable so he shifted his body as

though getting comfortable, leaning his back against the coffee table and scooting down slightly. Glancing back and forth between El's hand and the TV set, Mike gingerly crept his hand toward hers before delicately placing his overtop.

As inconspicuous as he'd been, El was very aware of the sudden contact and she turned to him with surprise but her face beamed with delight. When her brow then furrowed with concern, Mike quickly retracted his hand as though he'd hurt her.

"*What is it?*" Mike said quietly, assuming Will was paying attention to the TV and the characters on-screen were drowning out his words. "*I'm sorry, I -*"

El shook her head. "*No, feel sick,*" She pointed to her stomach and looked up at Mike with worry in her eyes.

"*Like you're gonna throw up?*" He asked, subconsciously scooting away the slightest bit. "*Like before?*"

El considered this but shook her head. "*Don't think so,*" She said. "*Feels... weird. Like bubbles. And here,*" She put a hand over Mike's heart and his breath caught in his throat. "*Really fast. Something's wrong,*"

Despite the concern on her face, Mike couldn't help the way his own heart flipped at what she was describing. He knew exactly what those feelings meant. "*You're not sick,*" He said quietly, leaning close to whisper. "*That's um, that's what happens when you have a... crush,*"

"*Not sick?*" El pulled away slightly to look at him and Mike forced himself to lean away a bit more. They were way too close.

"*No,*" Mike shook his head, grinning so hard he felt his cheeks might pop. "*Y-You call them 'butterflies',*" He said quietly. "*Like butterflies in your stomach,*"

"*Oh,*" El said, sitting back against the table again but still looking concerned. "*Will they stay?*"

Mike couldn't fight his blush at his point and the only way he was maintaining any sense of composure was at the idea that Will

probably couldn't hear them. They were whispering, the TV was on and a little loud, and he was sitting a couple feet behind them on the couch. "Maybe," He answered, hoping they stayed for a long time. *"It's a good thing; you don't have to worry,"* He gave her a reassuring smile and she reciprocated before turning to face the TV once again.

Jonathan got home around eight and sequestered himself in his bedroom, mumbling something about a photography portfolio that was due for school before disappearing for the rest of the evening. Joyce finished up in the kitchen and came out to the living room after a while to watch TV with the kids. While it felt like a facade, it still felt good to have these moments of peace. They weren't frantically planning anything and aside from the anxious thoughts running through her own head, everything almost seemed normal. She didn't want the kids to worry and she wanted El to be able to enjoy her limited time with her friends. Who knows where she would end up at the end of this mess. The best thing for her right now was some semblance of normalcy.

"Have you talked to your friends about what happened?" Mike asked at one point during a commercial. "Gabby and Trish and... Emma, right?"

"No supercoms," El shook her head and exhaled heavily. "I miss them,"

"They don't have radios or anything?" Mike clarified. "What about the phone?"

El stared at him curiously.

"You haven't learned how to use the phone yet?" Mike interpreted and El shook her head. "Okay, well, I could show you," He turned around to look at Will who was dozing in and out against the arm of the couch. Joyce had left the room a couple minutes ago to take the dog out to pee and have a smoke. Besides, she was expecting Hopper any minute at this point. "Will, do you mind?"

"Huh?" Will replied groggily. "What? Sorry, my medicine makes me kind of sleepy,"

"It's okay," Mike waved him off. "Where's your phone book? Can I show El how the phone works?"

"Sure," Will yawned, then pointed under the coffee table. "It's under here,"

"Cool," Mike said, reaching under the table to pull out a giant book with thin white pages and laying it across the floor between them. "Who do you wanna call?"

El stared in bewilderment at the expansive book in front of her. "I don't know," She said, thinking. "Trish,"

"Okay...um, do you know Trish's parents' names?" He asked, pausing. This might not work if she didn't.

She'd heard Trish refer to her mother by her first name before but what was it? Jenny? Janet? "Joann," El answered after a moment.

"Okay," Mike nodded. "Do you know her last name? That's how you figure out which section to look in in the book,"

"King," El replied confidently. She vividly remembered the name written on their mailbox and thought it was something out of a fairytale until Trish had cleared up that it was only their last name. Her dad was far from a king and according to her, 'this house is the last thing I'd think of if we're talking about fairytales,'

"Okay, 'King!...' Mike said under his breath as he flipped through the pages. "There's a lot of them so we just look through all these columns until we see 'Joann' or 'Clarksville' - something so that we know it's them. Make sense?"

El nodded and sidled up to him to help look as Mike ran his index finger down the pages, column by column.

"Here we go," He said after a minute. "I think this is it," He pointed to a listing with the initial 'J' and the city listed as 'Clarksville'. "Okay, so, we just take this over to the phone," He instructed, standing up with his thumb marking the page in the book so they didn't lose the listing as they walked over to the phone. El was just tall enough to reach the newly-attached wall phone and she pulled the receiver to

her ear, blinking at the sound of the dial tone and waiting for Mike's next instruction.

"Okay, next we just dial these numbers," He pointed to the phone number listed in the book. "One at a time, up here," He pointed to the rotary dial. "So the first number is '3' so you just put your finger up against the number you want and circle it around to the end," He explained, demonstrating. "Here, I'll do it for you this time and then maybe we can call someone else and you can try," El nodded as Mike dialed and as the phone began to ring, the front door opened and a fluffy white dog came barrelling into the house with Joyce close behind.

"Hi," El said uncertainly when a woman's tired voice answered the phone and she looked to Mike for guidance.

"Ask if Trish is home," Mike whispered encouragingly.

"Is Trish home?" El parroted, a little more confident.

"There you go, good boy," Joyce said as she stepped into the living room, though the dog was not paying attention at all. He ran around excitedly checking out what everyone was doing. "Go lay down,"

Hopper followed behind Joyce but when he saw El standing in the kitchen with the phone receiver to her ear, he yelled, "Put the phone down!"

El froze at the sudden exclamation and Mike quickly scrambled to take the receiver from her and hang it up.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Hopper demanded as he flew into the kitchen.

"I-I was just teaching her how to use the phone!" Mike exclaimed innocently.

"I told them they could use it!" Will chimed in from the couch.

"God damnit," Hopper groaned in frustration, putting his fist to his forehead. "The lab has this whole town bugged. What the hell made you think it was safe to use the phone?"

"I-I -" Mike stammered but any words he had died in his mouth. Had he royally screwed up? Had he potentially put El in danger with something as simple as a phone call? "I didn't think it would hurt anything, I didn't -"

"Just get outta here," Hopper ordered gruffly, sighing as Joyce entered the kitchen behind him. Mike grabbed El's hand and pulled her into the living room, his head swimming with regret and anxiety.

"Sorry El," Mike whispered sadly as they sat back down, their hands still connected, and El squeezed his briefly in response.

"*Calm down, Hopper,*" Joyce said quietly once the kids were out of earshot. "It's gonna be hard enough when you tell them the plan anyway. It was an honest mistake,"

"An honest mistake that could put this whole thing in jeopardy," Hopper retorted, but he forced himself to relax by exhaling sharply through his nose and taking another deep breath in. He understood Mike was just trying to do something nice for El. How was he supposed to know the phone could be bugged? Still, Hopper felt protective of El and he could see everything falling apart with the slightest misstep and her being put in danger which made it difficult to keep his temper in check.

"Okay," Hopper sighed. "You wanna tell 'em now?"

Joyce paused, glancing at the clock on the wall. It was getting late and Mike needed to be heading home soon. "Yeah," She sighed. "We shouldn't wait,"

Hopper scanned her face, registering the hesitation and dismay in her expression. "You want me to do it?"

Joyce shook her head. "We can tell them together. I'm fine," She said before leading him into the living room. "Will honey, could you turn the TV off, please?"

"Sure," Will replied, pushing a button on the remote and instantly bringing the room to silence as three sets of eyes turned to the adults in the room.

"Okay," Hopper began. "I've been out running around figuring out a plan for where El is gonna go from here," He paused, noting the way El was hanging on his every word. "It's too dangerous for her to stay with people that the lab *knows* she is connected to so that means just about everyone in Hawkins isn't an option. At least not until we find a way to stop the lab and whatever the hell it is they're trying to do,"

"So where's she gonna go?" Will inquired.

"First priority is keeping El safe," Hopper said as a disclaimer. "I want you kids to remember that, alright?" He waited for the three to nod or supply some sort of expression of understanding. "Okay, so, El," He directed his attention to her and she sat up a little straighter. "I talked to your friend Emma's parents and you'll stay with them over the weekend. I'll take you up there on Friday and then come Sunday I'll pick you up and drive you down to Finksburg. I've got an old friend down there who's agreed to take you in temporarily. I'll fill you in on the backstory later but as far as he's concerned, you're my niece, got it?"

El hesitated, looking between Mike and Joyce before reluctantly looking back at Hopper and nodding.

"Wait, *Finksburg*?" Mike shook his head and blinked, incredulous. "Where is *Finksburg*?"

"It's about two hours south of Indianapolis," Hopper replied flatly. "Two and a half from here,"

"She's going *that far*?" Will exclaimed.

"There's gotta be another place," Mike shook his head. "How will any of us see her? How will we even know if she's safe?!"

"Like I said, he's an old, *good* friend of mine," Hopper said evenly, patiently. "She'll be okay and I'm gonna check in on a regular basis,"

"No way," Mike replied defiantly. "You can't send her that far. She doesn't even know this person!"

"The *decision* is *final*," Hopper said sternly, holding onto his patience. "This is the only way to keep El safe at this point. We've got to get

her as far away from the lab as possible. There *is no alternative*,"

"But that's not -" Mike started to argue, then glanced at El who had sat back on her bottom and was staring at the floor, crestfallen. He could feel the weight of her disappointment and sadness on his own chest.

"Mike, we promise you, this is the best option for El," Joyce said empathetically, coming forward and kneeling on the floor by the coffee table. "None of us like this but sometimes we have to do things we don't wanna do if it's best for the people we care about,"

"Will you visit?" El looked up at Joyce, then around the room to make sure they knew her question was directed at everyone.

"Of course, sweetie," Joyce said, grabbing her hand and squeezing it. "We won't be able to see you a lot but you'll see us again," El pursed her lips as her eyes began to water and Joyce rubbed her thumbs against El's hand comfortingly. "Don't be scared, El. I know this is really hard but I promise you, we're gonna make sure you're okay. Okay? You're not losing any of us,"

El nodded her understanding as a tear slipped down her nose and dripped onto her lap. Doleful, Mike exhaled sharply and glanced at El before patting her on the back.

"It'll be okay, El," He said for her sake, though he hoped it was true. "You can still talk to all of us on your supercom, remember?" He offered, trying to put on a more positive tone. "You've got your own long-distance range built in,"

El turned her head to look at him and the pitiful expression on her face almost made him lose his ability to stay calm.

"But remember, that's not til next week," Joyce said, pulling El's attention back to her. "You'll be here a couple days and then you'll be with Emma for another couple days,"

"We can play whatever games you want on my Atari tomorrow," Will offered, trying to cheer El up. "Or I could teach you how to draw a dragon,"

El couldn't help but smile at Will's sweet offerings. "Okay," She nodded and Joyce wiped a tear from El's cheek with the back of her finger.

"Why don't you get ready and take a shower, okay?" Joyce said. "It's getting late and I think we could all use some rest,"

El nodded obediently and Joyce released her hands before standing up.

"Can I come back tomorrow after school?" Mike asked as he stood up and Joyce nodded.

"Of course, Mike," She smiled. "You know you're always welcome here,"

"Okay," Mike nodded, hesitating. He didn't want to leave even though he knew it was getting close to the time his mom wanted him back anyway. "Uh," He waited until Joyce and Hopper had exited and Will pretended he wasn't paying attention. "I'll see you tomorrow, El,"

El nodded, her face still dejected, but she offered him a half-smile. "Tomorrow,"

Knowing Will was right behind them and not wanting to engage in any other interaction that could be potentially embarrassing or awkward, Mike took a step back and smiled at El before walking over to Will.

"I'll see ya later," He said, attempting to sound as normal as possible. He didn't want to act weird in front of his friend but if there was anyone he felt comfortable around, it was Will. His quiet, gentle demeanor made it easy to be yourself and Mike knew that Will understood, in some way, how he was feeling.

"See ya tomorrow, Mike," Will said with a smile.

"Okay, um," Mike said as he gathered his jacket and backpack from the floor where he'd left it hours ago. "Bye,"

"Get home safe, Mike!" Joyce called from the next room as he let himself out the front door.

Once outside, Mike walked around to the side of the house where he'd left his bike in the grass. With the sun having gone down, the air had a chill to it and he quickly zipped his jacket up to his chest. Why did everything have to be so hard? Why couldn't El just stay in Hawkins and go to their school like a normal girl? Why did those stupid government people need to be after her? It wasn't fair and he hated it. In frustration, he kicked a fallen tree branch that was lying in the grass next to his bike. It didn't go far and the smaller extensions of the branch tangled with his shoelaces, frustrating him more as he kicked the lightweight branch away. In a huff, he climbed on his bike, finally feeling the heavy weight of his exhaustion from earlier today settle back on his shoulders as he rode home.

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Nancy heard Mike come home and slam his bedroom door shut but she was otherwise preoccupied. After her conversation with Jonathan earlier that day, she couldn't help but reflect on everything that had happened since November. He had had a point - there was a time when she put way too much thought into what the people at school thought of her. Most weren't even her friends and yet she still tried to please everyone as if being herself wasn't enough. The way Jonathan had read her like a book during their walk in the woods settled in her mind. She wanted so badly to not end up like her parents, in a loveless marriage with a boring, predictable life. So she'd broken from the cookie-cutter mold of the "good girl" and that was great for a while, except until it wasn't.

Why did it matter what people like Steve and Tommy and Carol thought of her? Steve wasn't so bad but everyone at school seemed to have these categories that everyone was supposed to fit into. What if she didn't *want* to fit in a category anymore? What if that made her feel claustrophobic? She wanted to like who she liked, regardless of what other people thought. She wanted to *be herself* and that should be good enough. It should have been good enough all along but she didn't give herself the chance.

Barb had been completely right. The heavy weight of mourning settled onto Nancy's chest as she lay back against her neatly-made bed. What was she supposed to do without her best friend? Barb had known her better than anyone, better than she knew *herself*. She was

stupid for not listening to her in the first place and even if El was right and it wasn't completely her fault that Barb was gone, guilt was a difficult thing to shake.

"This isn't you," Barb had said at Steve's house and god, why hadn't she listened? Why hadn't she understood what Barb already knew?

Even though she had Jonathan to talk to about her grief with Barb, it didn't completely fill the hole. Sure, she could talk to any one of the people who had been involved in last fall's craziness but no one really understood this kind of loss. Mike found El again and even Jonathan had his brother back. In a way, she almost felt a little jealous. Why had Will been able to survive but not Barb? Not that she wished anything terrible on Will, not in the slightest, but why did Barb have to die? And when would she stop feeling so alone?

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The next day came and went too quickly and before El knew it, it was Friday morning. Joyce had picked up a box of Eggos yesterday that were specifically for El but no one was awake yet to make them for her. She'd already gone through half the box yesterday but she'd never attempted to make them on her own. She pulled the box out of the freezer, careful to avoid waking Joyce who was asleep in the living room.

Will had been sleeping in his own bed the past couple nights and Joyce had taken the couch to ensure El could stay in a big, comfortable bed while she was here. She didn't mind sleeping on the couch - with the location of her incision she was actually able to find more comfortable sleeping positions there than in her own bed. Plus, she knew El would likely be on a couch or at least, without her own bed for a while during all these transitions. Two nights on the couch weren't so bad.

The sun had barely peeked over the horizon but El was up and about. She'd come out into the kitchen as quietly as she could so as not to disturb anyone. Jonathan would be getting up for school in an hour but Will and Joyce were still off from work and school so they could sleep in.

El had seen Mike and Joyce and Becky all make Eggos for her before and it didn't seem that difficult. Spurred by the hunger rumbling in her belly, she pulled the toaster away from the back of the counter and checked that it was plugged in. She dropped two Eggos into the two-slot toaster, already planning on making several more, and pulled the front lever down. Peering over the top, she watched as the metal inside heated up and turned red and she could already smell her delicious breakfast cooking.

If Mike were here, he'd probably be pulling out the butter and syrup for her to drizzle all over her waffles but El had eaten them so many times without any sort of embellishment that she actually preferred them that way. As she waited for the Eggos to pop up, she paced impatiently around the kitchen, picking up random objects she'd never seen before and inspected them with minimal interest as her stomach continued to growl.

After a couple minutes of continuous checking and rechecking, the Eggos didn't seem to be cooking fast enough. Maybe something was wrong with the Byers' toaster and it needed a little help so El focused her mental energy on the wires inside the toaster, increasing the heat until smoke began to come out of the slots at the top. El broke her mental stronghold but it was already too late - the little toaster couldn't handle the intensity of the electrical current El had initiated and a few sparks flew out of the slots before a flame ignited and El jumped back from the heat.

The fire alarm above her began to screech and El clamped her hands over her ears, panicked. She didn't know what to do but it was only a matter of seconds before Joyce was in the kitchen, screaming at her to stay away from the counter where the toaster was currently spitting flames. Clad in pajamas, Joyce grabbed a fire extinguisher from behind the fridge and sprayed the counter with white foam that instantly coated the toaster and surrounding area until the fire was out.

Breathing heavily, Joyce plopped the extinguisher on the table and looked at El. "Are you okay?"

El nodded, glancing at the mess on the counter. "Yes," She said in a small voice. "I'm sorry,"

"It's okay, sweetheart," Joyce said, walking over to inspect the damaged toaster. The Eggos inside were blackened and the edge of the toaster had melted and deformed from the heat. "We needed a new one anyway," She sighed, tossing the appliance back onto the counter and wiping the foam that had touched her fingertips on the legs of her pants.

"What happened?" Jonathan asked, stepping out of his room and down the hall, his hair bedraggled and his eyes half shut with sleep. "Is everyone okay?"

"Yeah, just a little kitchen mishap," Joyce said, noticing how frazzled and ashamed El looked and pulling her into a side hug. "Go back to bed; I'll get you up in an hour,"

"That's okay," Jonathan yawned. "I'm already up, I'm gonna take a shower," He said before heading back down the hall.

Joyce looked down at El and rubbed her hand up and down the girl's arm. "Don't worry about it, El," She said comfortingly. "It's okay. That thing's been on its last legs for a month now. I should've bought a new one a while ago," She glanced up at the open Eggo box on the counter. "I have an idea. I don't know if it'll be the same but maybe..." She walked over to the oven and checked that there weren't any pans or baking dishes being stored inside. "Maybe we can make them in the oven. You wanna try that?" She looked back to see El nod as she set the baking temperature and pulled a cookie sheet out of the drawer under the oven. "I'll get this put together for you and you can go check on Will in case the alarm woke him up, okay?"

.....

Will had slept like a rock through the cacophonous alarm and didn't wake up until mid-morning which gave El the opportunity to try and fall back asleep with a full belly as Joyce busied herself around the house. El couldn't help but think to herself how much of a fit Hopper would have if he knew how active Joyce was being but it was obvious the woman didn't like to stay still for very long. He had to know that about her.

When El woke up again, it was almost lunch time and Will was

already in the living room watching TV from the couch. Still a bit groggy from sleep, El trudged into the room and plopped herself down on the opposite end of the couch. Will was flipping through channels, though there weren't many options to choose from, and El settled back into the couch cushions, yawning.

"Morning," Will greeted her pleasantly. "Mom said you had an Eggo accident in the kitchen?"

El nodded. "You were asleep,"

"Yeah, I can't believe I didn't hear it," He shrugged, continuing to flip through channels without pausing more than two seconds on each one. "I must have been really tired," As he cycled through the channels a second time, he sighed. "There isn't anything good on TV this time of day,"

El watched as the pictures on the screen flashed from one to the next without much thought until a nature documentary came up on the screen. Tall yellow creatures with brown splotches all over their bodies and long necks were eating leaves from trees as a man narrated their behavior. El found them fascinating and before Will could switch the channel again, she levitated the remote out of his hands and over to her.

"Hey!" Will complained, then laughed. "Do we really have to watch a documentary about giraffes?" He asked, looking from her to the screen and back.

"Yes," El smiled slightly and glued her eyes to the TV. "Giraffes," She tried out the new word, enjoying the way it sounded. For some reason, it felt like a good name for those interesting animals. It fit them somehow.

"They're pretty cool, huh?" Will said amicably. "If you want, I could teach you how to draw one before... before you go,"

El nodded happily at this and rested her arms and head over the arm of the couch, content to watch these fascinating new creatures until lunchtime. She didn't want to think about leaving right now. It was hard enough to imagine saying goodbye before when she was going

to live with Becky. Now her future was much more uncertain and the longer she could enjoy the company of the people she knew and cared for, the better.

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"I took for granted, all the times that I thought would last somehow. I hear the laughter, I taste the tears, but I can't get near you now..."

44. Love Will Lead You Back

[A/N: Welcome to the turning point! Not sure when I'll be able to update again because things are getting busier for me but please let me know what you think! THINGS ARE GONNA GET INTENSE.

P.S. Trigger warning: Drunk and abusive fathers.

P.P.S PLEASE go listen to this song's chapter. Ahhhhh, I have been listening to it nonstop for two days and I love it so, so much. Gets me pumped, man.]

Chapter 44: Love Will Lead You Back (by Taylor Dayne)

"Saying goodbye is never an easy thing, but you never said that you'd stay forever. So if you must go, oh, darling I set you free. But I know in time that we'll be together..."

.....

Mike, Dustin, and Lucas arrived at the Byers' house almost immediately after school and Jonathan and Nancy showed up a little while later. They had all wanted to make sure they had the opportunity to see El off since she wouldn't be stopping back in Hawkins again after she left Clarksville for Finksburg. They'd spent the time chatting about nothing and everything and Nancy had brought a few more hand-me-downs she found for El to take with her - a summer skirt and a beaded tank top plus a brand-new pair of slippers she'd seen on sale at the drugstore that just seemed perfect for El. They were pink and unbearably soft with a tiny bow over the toes.

Dustin had brought a copy of the same joke book he'd gotten for Christmas since she'd been so entertained by it in the hospital and Lucas gave her a D&D instruction manual so she could learn how to play whenever they did see her again.

"You're part of the party so you should know how to play," He said with a smile and a shrug.

Mike had been fervently working on recreating the plastic picture frame from tech ed that Troy had destroyed and presented the new version to El as a parting gift.

"I... wanted to put a picture of us in it," Mike said under his breath, mildly embarrassed by how obviously everyone could hear what he was saying to her. "But I didn't have one so it's just the frame,"

"That is so sweet, Mike," Joyce commented and Mike's face flushed. He bit his bottom lip and cast his gaze down. Seeing anyone else's faces at this point would make it even worse.

"I could take a picture of you guys, if you want?" Jonathan offered. "It wouldn't be ready by the time El had to go but I could give it to Hopper sometime or mail it at least,"

Mike looked to El who had brightened at the suggestion. "Okay, yeah!" He nodded. "Thanks!"

"I'll go get my camera!" Jonathan said and disappeared from the living room.

"I can't believe you're actually leaving," Lucas shook his head. "It feels like you just got here,"

"Says the guy who wanted to leave her out in the rain," Dustin quipped good-naturedly, giving Lucas a playful shove.

"Hey, I came around!" Lucas defended lightly. "It's not everyday you run into a random telekinetic Jedi girl so sue me for being suspicious!" He laughed.

"We're really glad we met you, though," Will said earnestly. "I know these guys knew you longer than I did but I think you're great and I just hope all of this works out and eventually you can come back to Hawkins again,"

"Amen to that," Dustin said.

"Okay!" Jonathan returned from his room with his camera in hand. "You guys ready? Is it gonna be a group picture or just you and Mike?"

"Can we do more than one?" Lucas asked and Jonathan nodded.

"Sure, that's fine,"

Everyone took turns taking individual pictures with El by the door as they waited for Hopper to arrive. Despite the joy and fun of being surrounded by friends, the hint of sadness lingered in the air as everyone knew it was only a matter of time before El had to leave. Jonathan got a couple group pictures as well as one of El with just the boys. When it was Mike's turn to take an individual picture with El, he felt a lot more bashful and awkward than he had anticipated. Everyone was watching and his movements felt jerky. Lucas and Dustin and Will had had no problems putting their arms around El and smiling for the camera but for Mike, it was such a big thing to do because it meant a lot more to him.

"C'mon Mike, get in there," Joyce waved him to step closer to El since he was standing several inches away with his arms like boards at his sides.

El looked at him expectantly and he swallowed, trying to ignore the way the hairs on his arms were standing on end and the butterflies in his own stomach were beating their wings out of control.

"Come on, man. Act like you like her!" Dustin teased and Mike shot him a warning glare, made much less intimidating by the way his face and ears were beet-red.

"That's an understatement," Lucas joked under his breath but it was loud enough for everyone to still hear.

"Okay, that's enough," Joyce said, suppressing a smirk. "Let's get a good picture. Jonathan's waiting,"

Mike inhaled and took a step closer to El, closing the space between them and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, unsure of what to do with his hands so he awkwardly kept his fingers out so they didn't wrap around her arm naturally. El was unfazed by Mike's rigidity and nervousness and posed for the camera by dropping her head onto Mike's shoulder and smiling up at Jonathan.

"Awwwwwwww!" Lucas and Dustin goaded in unison and it was all Mike could do to maintain his smile long enough for the camera to flash.

"Perfect," Jonathan said after taking the shot. "I think that's everyone,"

"Keep your camera out for when Hopper gets here," Joyce said as Jonathan ducked his head and freed himself from his camera strap. "I'm sure he'll want a picture with El, too,"

"Aww, I think they like each other," Dustin quipped to Lucas, ignoring Mike's embarrassed glare. "What do you think, Lucas?"

"Well, I think we're certainly seeing some proof, Dustin," Lucas replied, imitating a sports commentator. "It'll be hard to deny that one,"

"Shut up," Mike grumbled.

"Cut it out, guys," Will laughed as a knock on the door disrupted the jovial nature of their little gathering and a somber quiet fell over them as Joyce opened the door.

Despite knowing he was on his way, it still made everyone's hearts sink a little to see Hopper arrive ready to take El away.

"I guess this is it," Dustin said.

"Hop, did you want a picture with El?" Joyce asked, gesturing to Jonathan behind her.

Hopper removed his hat from his head, his gruff facial expression softening. "Yeah, let's get one for the road,"

Jonathan took a photo of El and Hopper who crouched down to almost the same height as the young girl. "Got it," He said, gently putting his camera down on the table behind him.

"Okay," Hopper exhaled. "You ready?" He looked down at El who glanced around the room at everyone before giving a small reluctant nod.

"Here's her stuff," Joyce said, pulling a duffel bag out from the floor by the couch. "I double-checked and everything should be in here,"

"You got the sketchbook I gave her this morning, right?" Will asked and Joyce patted the side of the bag where the outline of the book could be seen.

"Right here," Joyce nodded, handing the duffel bag to Hopper who slipped his arm through the strap and threw it over his shoulder.

"I guess it's time," Lucas said, stepping up and giving El a hug goodbye. "See you around, El,"

"Don't forget about us," Dustin said as he hugged her and El fervently shook her head.

"Never," She said quietly with a sad smile.

"Take care of yourself," Nancy said, pulling El in for a tight hug. "If you need me, I guess just let Mike know and he'll tell me,"

El glanced back at Mike who was looking down at the floor dejectedly but at the mention of his name, he looked up and offered a small smile. "For sure," He nodded.

Once everyone had said their goodbyes and it was down to Mike, Joyce took a cue from Mike's nervous expression and started to engage Hopper, Jonathan, and Nancy in a conversation about the photos Jonathan took.

Mike wished desperately that his friends would follow in similar fashion but Dustin and Lucas were standing by, watching with great interest. It took a great deal of willpower to ignore Dustin's raised eyebrows and toothy grin or the knowing smirk on Lucas' face. Will at least had the presence of mind to pretend he was looking for something under the coffee table.

El grabbed Mike's attention, however, when she stepped forward and stared at him with a slight smile. It was so easy to forget about everything else when she looked at him like that.

"I-I -" Mike stammered, then cleared his throat and spoke under his

breath. "I'm gonna miss you, El,"

El nodded, her eyes glistening. "Me too," Without hesitation, she came forward and wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug, her head on his shoulder as she lingered long enough for Mike's brain to stop misfiring and allow him to put his arms around her, too. "I crush you," She said quietly.

Mike swallowed, his heart racing and his palms sweating. "M-Me too," Pulling away and trying to regain his composure, Mike forced a normal voice. "Don't forget to call us on the supercom. I mean, don't overuse your powers or anything but I mean, if you get the chance and you want to. Um, just... and be careful you don't use your powers in front of strangers or anything like that. But, uh..."

"She gets it," Dustin said, clapping Mike on the back. "Stay in touch, right, El?"

El nodded and smiled despite the sadness in her heart. "I will,"

.....

The drive up to Clarksville was quiet and reminiscent of the first time El had come up here to live with her aunt and mom. Sitting silently in the front seat with the occasional tear breaking free and sliding down her face, El leaned against the window watching the now familiar trees and signs pass. It would be nice to see her other friends again but even that made her sad. How would she talk to them without supercoms or radios to connect? They didn't even know about her powers so would that even have been a possibility even if they did own radios of some sort? El felt like she was losing everything she'd gained in such a short period of time. She'd had nothing but the deceptive and manipulative love of her Papa for the majority of her life and now with Mike and Hopper and Joyce and everyone she had gained so much more. Now it felt like she was losing everything even though Hopper insisted this would only be temporary. He promised he would find a way to stop the lab and protect her but after all her running, she was beginning to think that maybe that was a promise that couldn't be kept.

Unbeknownst to the two of them, however, was an unmarked black

van that had been tailing them since they left Hawkins. The windows were tinted and it had kept an exceptionable distance from the police chief's SUV, making it completely inconspicuous on the long drive up to Clarksville.

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As far as Emma's family was concerned, this was just a regular weekend sleepover with all the girls so El's presence didn't take much explaining on Hopper's part. Following a brief and scripted goodbye with Hopper, El was back in the company of her girl friends.

"Where have you *been*?" Trish asked almost as soon as El was in the door. "It's like you disappeared off the face of the earth,"

"You missed a lot while you were gone," Gabby added, biting off the end of a cherry-flavored Airhead..

"Yeah, like all the times *Josh* made eyes at Emma at school this week," Trish teased and Emma flushed.

"Did you go back to Hawkins?" Emma asked, trying to change the subject.

El nodded and Emma's mom interrupted, "Girls, let's let El get in the door before we start all the chit-chatting, okay?" Emma's mom was pretty and blonde, just like her daughter, with shoulder-length hair that she feathered back perfectly into place. She ushered the girls out of the foyer and toward the hall. Emma lived in a one-level three-bedroom rancher that despite its modest height, made up for what it lacked with spacious rooms and a well-decorated interior.

"Why don't you put El's bag with everyone else's in your room and I can order you girls a pizza?" Emma's mom suggested, handing her daughter El's duffel bag.

"Okay," Emma took the bag obediently and waved for El to follow. "My room's right down this hall. I'll show you around,"

El followed behind her friends with Gabby and Trish chatting animatedly behind as usual. She was trying to have a good time but all she could think about was how this could be the last weekend she

sees these friends in a long time and how she'd just said goodbye to some of her closest friends back in Hawkins.

"Okay, I'll leave your bag here," Emma said, dropping El's duffel bag in the corner of her room where a few other travel bags were open with their contents already spread out around them.

Emma's room was light purple with glow in the dark stars on the ceiling and a white desk with notebooks and her school bag on top. There were shelves with dolls and keepsakes that decorated three of the four walls and a window with a sheer white curtain pulled closed. The bed was a decent size, able to fit two of them comfortably and three of them if they squeezed in but the two rolled-up sleeping bags on the floor indicated that wouldn't be an issue.

"Okay, so what happened?" Trish asked, tossing herself onto Emma's bed. "You just kind of disappeared and it was really weird,"

El contemplated telling them everything that had happened the past few days, remembering the details Hopper had told her to include and leave out. "M-My aunt... had an accident," She said, forcing her voice to remain as even as possible.

"Oh damn," Trish's playful expression became more solemn. "I'm sorry... uh, is she... okay?"

El shook her head, blinking away tears. She was getting so sick of crying at this point. It took so much out of her and made her want to sleep all the time.

"I'm really sorry, El," Gabby said, patting her shoulder as Emma sympathetically rubbed her back. "We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to?"

El looked up at Gabby with relief and that was all the cue needed to move on to the next subject.

"Okay, so, you remember I'm in that musical, right? 'Funny Girl?'" Gabby said, taking on a more upbeat tone. "We have a rehearsal tomorrow even though it's Saturday but ahhhhh it's been so much fun, I don't even care!" She smiled brightly and El smiled back. She knew

Gabby was looking forward to this.

Gabby proceeded to fill El in on all the details of the musical and how rehearsals had been going thus far, much to Emma and Trish's chagrin as they had heard all of these details over and over again just about every day. They spent the next hour chatting and goofing off and devouring the pizza once it arrived. As the night carried on, they were just getting settled in the living room watching 'Valley Girl' when they heard car tires screech in the driveway outside and a few minutes later, pounding on the front door that made them jump.

"What the hell is that?" Trish exclaimed in a hushed voice as Emma's mom came in from the study down the hall.

"Coming!" She called out as the pounding continued. "Mr. Kagler," Emma's mom blinked in surprise at the sight of Gabby's dad at the door - his face sweaty and red, his brow set in a scowl, and the stale stench of cigarettes and alcohol on his breath as he leaned against the doorframe. "What are you do -"

"Where's my daughter?" He demanded, his speech slurring as he brushed past the petite woman and into the house.

Gabby froze in her place on the floor and El noticed the terrified look in her eyes. She wasn't sure if she would need to intervene or not but her fists clenched and her brow furrowed in anger nonetheless.

"You," He bellowed and pointed at Gabby on the floor, his voice dripping with disdain as he nearly tripped over the couch leg walking over to them. "Get your ass out to the car,"

"Andy!" Emma's mom called out, helpless, and her husband appeared not even a minute later.

"Hey Jerry," The mild-mannered man with wire-frame glasses entered and tried to calm the drunken man. "What's going on? It's late,"

"I'm taking my daughter home," Gabby's dad said thickly, his button-down shirt loose at the collar as sweat dripped down his neck. "She has chores,"

"Okay, alright," Emma's dad said, motioning with his hands for Jerry

to relax. "That's fine. How much have you had to drink?"

Gabby watched in horror at the scene unfolding before them as Emma and Trish held her securely by the arms in an attempt to serve as some sort of barrier of protection and reassurance. El, however, was motionless and watching Jerry's every move.

Jerry stepped up to Andy, entirely too close for comfort, and exhaled sharply. "I don't see how that's any of your business," He seethed, then turned back to the girls sitting on the floor. "Gabby, *get your ass out to the car!*"

Andy put his hands on Jerry's shoulders, attempting to calm and distract him but the belligerent man yanked himself away from Andy's grasp. "Jerry, I don't think you should be driving -"

"Back the *hell* off, Andrew," Gabby's dad spat in Andy's face and when Gabby hesitated to move, he grabbed her by her casted wrist, yanking her to her feet. Gabby nearly tripped standing up as she yelped in pain and her friends protested.

"Leave her alone!" Trish yelled angrily but he was already dragging her out the door faster than anyone could react.

As El watched, she had flashbacks of the lab - orderlies grabbing her roughly, yanking her out of seats and down hallways, ignoring her protests and hurting her or throwing her into the isolation room. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears and she spaced out for a moment as her friend's cries seemed to become distant to her ears.

"No! Dad, stop, please!" Gabby cried as she tried to pry his hand off of her arm. He had shifted his grip off of the cast on her wrist but was now holding onto her upper arm just above her elbow.

"Andy, call the police," Emma's mom said firmly, still wracked with adrenaline as her husband jogged over to the phone. She and the girls had run up to the door, watching in frozen panic as the freckled young girl struggled against her father's hold.

"You're hurting me!" Gabby cried, trying to wrench herself away from her father, her shoes grinding against the gravel driveway.

"Shut your mouth," He slurred, stumbling to the car with her arm still in his hand like a vice. "I told you to have your room cleaned, the trash taken out, *all* of your chores done but nobody in this goddamn family listens to a damn thing I say," He mumbled loudly to himself. "Useless, just like your fucking mother -"

"Don't talk about her like that!" Gabby cried out defensively and he whirled around and back-handed her across the face. The action made it easier for Gabby to slip out of his grip and she backed away, tears streaming down her face.

"Who the *hell* do you think you're talkin' to, little lady?" He growled, furious. "Get back over here, now!"

Gabby shook her head vehemently. "No!"

"So help me god, if you don't get your ass over to this car, Gabrielle..." Her dad's eyes flashed and he started to charge after her until he was suddenly frozen in place, unable to move. Gabby watched in confused shock as her father stood mid-step, looking just as confused as the rest of them. Not even a second later, his feet were over his head and he came crashing down to the ground but not before banging his head on the side mirror of his car. He landed hard on the gravel, his leg bent in an unfathomable way under the weight of his body as his shoulders hit the ground with a thud.

Emma's mom rushed over to Gabby who had fallen to her knees in the grass and was crying hysterically. Trish and Emma followed suit, kneeling in the ground and hugging Gabby closely as Emma's dad stood in the doorway, still on the phone with 911. El, however, stood on the porch step, glaring menacingly at the drunken heap in the driveway as he moaned in pain. She only wished she could have done more to hurt him without drawing unwanted attention to her powers as she discreetly wiped a stream of blood from her nose.

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It had taken some convincing and encouragement to get Gabby interested in going to her rehearsal the following day. Thankfully, her father hadn't done any additional damage to her wrist and while it had hurt to have it grabbed and pulled, her cast had protected her

broken wrist from being re-broken. The bruise across her cheek was another story.

The police had arrived shortly after Emma's dad got off the phone and Jerry was arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct as well as assault on his daughter. They'd needed to call an ambulance for his severely broken leg but to everyone's relief, he had left in handcuffs. Emma's parents called Gabby's mom to let her know what happened and reassured Gabby she could stay and they were there for her no matter what. No one had really known about the abuse outside of Trish, Emma, and El, so to have some adult support was a relief.

Still, Gabby wasn't entirely convinced that her nightmare was over and the red and purple bruise across her face made it difficult to think of anything else.

"We'll put some make-up on it and no one will even know," Trish suggested reassuringly. "You're not that swollen so a little cover-up here and there and it'll be like it never happened,"

Gabby sat quietly on the bed, her legs criss-crossed, and El sat close by, watching her. She empathized with Gabby more than she had the words to describe. Seeing her father in action last night only solidified that. She saw herself in Gabby - abused and neglected and hurt by someone who was supposed to take care of her. She recognized every emotion in Gabby's face as one of her own - fear, shame, helplessness, anger, loneliness - everything she had felt before she escaped the lab.

"You love all this acting and singing stuff," Trish continued. "It'll make you feel better,"

"And we'll go with you," Emma offered to which Trish unequivocally agreed.

"Absolutely," She nodded. "We'll all be there and you'll strut your stuff and be awesome and then we'll come back and do whatever but don't let that asshole get in the way of that,"

Gabby inhaled, shuddering as she exhaled. "O-Okay... I'll try,"

"You'll be fine," Emma rubbed her back. "You always say how much fun you have at these rehearsals,"

"We'll just hang out in the audience cheering you on," Trish winked and Gabby couldn't help a small smile.

"It's not going to be exciting or fun for you guys," Gabby chuckled lightly.

"Eh," Trish waved her off. "Don't worry about us. You just do your thing and forget about last night,"

"Okay," Gabby nodded and when Trish and Emma scurried off to the bathroom to find Emma's mom's makeup bag, El scooted closer to the red-headed girl.

"Gabby," She said quietly and her friend turned to look at her. "I... I understand," El looked up at Gabby, hoping she understood what she was trying to convey. Hurt and broken and betrayed... she didn't know how to say it all but she hoped Gabby could feel it. "I'm sorry,"

Gabby's lips stretched into a tight smile. "Thanks El," She said, dropping her head onto El's shoulder and sighing.

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The theater room at Clarksville Middle was huge with a big black stage and two doors on either side leading to the back areas where performers got changed and waited for their scenes. Dozens of chairs and music stands were scattered about across the linoleum floor and a covered piano sat on one side of the room next to a chalkboard.

A few dozen kids El didn't know were up on and around the stage with Gabby as the theater director and music teacher gave instructions for each person and group scene by scene. Trish and Emma were lounged in the chairs, watching the budding young actors take direction and making comments about the people they knew and didn't know. Despite her earlier reservations, Gabby seemed to come alive in this place and with the help of a couple layers of makeup, she looked like her usual self. El watched with interest as talented girls and boys sang songs she didn't know and

spoke words she didn't always understand but found fascinating. It was good to see Gabby happy after what had happened the night before. She only hoped Gabby's dad would never come back.

After nearly an hour had passed, El needed to use the restroom. Emma was leaning forward against the back of the chair in front of her, watching the actors on stage, and El tapped her shoulder to get her attention.

"Bathroom?" She whispered and Emma sat back.

"It's just down the hall we came in from," She pointed out the main doors of the room. "Go back out there and turn left and it's down like, close to the middle of the hallway on the right, by the water fountain,"

"Okay," El nodded and got up, quietly exiting the theater room.

With it being a Saturday, the school was otherwise empty sans everyone who came for rehearsal and a secretary in the main office. The lights in this particular hallway were a little dim but El could still see where she was going without any trouble. Halfway down the hall, she found the girls and boys bathrooms and as she remembered from countless life lessons with her friends and surrogate family, she was supposed to use the one that said 'Girls'.

She pushed the blue-painted door open and found a pitch-black room. El pawed at the wall for a lightswitch and the room brightened in stages with each set of lights slowly flickering on. The concrete walls almost reminded her of the lab and she purposefully avoided looking at them as she went to the bathroom and came out of the stall to wash her hands. Looking in the mirror as she rinsed, she imagined what it would be like to go to school here, or anywhere, really. To be a normal girl that used bathrooms like this on a regular basis between classes. She'd hoped she could start school in a *real school* come fall but now with everything so up in the air, she wasn't sure what would happen. Would she still continue her lessons with this new person she'd be living with next week? How long would she be there? Would she have to go somewhere else? Would she ever be able to come back to Hawkins? El sighed, grabbing a paper towel and drying her hands before forcing herself to leave her angst behind for Gabby's sake. She wanted to support her friend.

As she pulled the bathroom door open and switched the lights back off, it was only seconds before she was hit over the head and felt a sharp pin-prick stab her in the neck. Before she could register what was happening, everything went black and she fell to the floor.

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"I'm sure, sure as stars are shining, one day you will find me again; it won't be long..."

45. You Are Not Alone

[A/N: Ahhhh I love you guys so much. Thank you for your sweet reviews! :) This is really keeping my momentum up and I just want to write faster for you guys! lol We'll see how much I can get done before my semester starts.

Also, fun fact: The name 'Clarksville' comes from an area near me so it's really amusing to me when I'm driving and see a sign that's like '8 miles to Clarksville' or hear a radio commercial about some event happening there XD]

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Chapter 45: You Are Not Alone (by Michael Jackson)

"I can hear your prayers, your burdens I will bear. But first I need your hand, then forever can begin..."

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The Night Before

It'd been hours since he'd seen movement in or around the house. When he'd accepted a job like this, along with a substantial bonus in pay, he'd also anticipate a little bit of action or excitement but so far, the most interesting part had been tailing the police chief's SUV without him noticing. After he'd dropped the girl off, it'd been dull from then on.

He was supposed to keep an eye on her whereabouts and give indication to the lab as to when the most subtle time to pick up the girl would be. They hadn't wanted "witnesses" which made this whole thing seem like some kind of spy operation and a lot more fun than his last summer gig loading and unloading boxes at a warehouse in downtown Indianapolis.

Freddie was probably doing paperwork or some other lame job like that. They'd been college roommates for the past semester and he was stuck with the loser for at least the remainder of the spring semester.

He'd been dying to have a roommate he could actually have fun and stir shit up with but Freddie wasn't that guy, unfortunately for Jake.

When a dark car swerved its way into the driveway of the house Jake was watching, he instantly sat up straight. He wasn't expecting any other visitors coming to the house. A drunk and slovenly man got out of the car and marched up to the porch, leaving his sedan still running. Jake watched as the door opened and the man went inside. He could faintly hear yelling but there was no chance he'd hear anything audible. He'd parked the lab's black van at the edge of the property in the cover of trees and shadows which, on a dark night with a broken street lamp, made him essentially invisible.

After a few minutes of anticipation, staring at the door and the shadows shifting in front of the pulled curtains, the front door burst open again and the man Jake had seen enter the house was now dragging a young girl out. She had long hair that was maybe brown or red - he couldn't tell in the dark - and she was thrashing against his grip on her as he yelled.

Picking up the car radio, Jake attempted to contact Agent Kramer. "Agent Kramer, do you copy?"

After a moment, an older man's annoyed voice answered. "Yes, Jake. What is it now?"

"I'm at the house and a man just dragged some girl out of it," Jake said, watching through the windshield as the man whipped around and smacked the girl across the face so hard he lost his grip and she stumbled back. "It isn't you guys, right?"

"No," Agent Kramer seemed more interested at this point. "Can you identify the people you're seeing. Is it the same girl? Eleven?"

"I don't think so," Jake shook his head, fascinated by the altercation he was witnessing. "She - Holy *shit*!" He laughed, incredulous as Agent Kramer repeatedly asked what was happening.

"This guy!" Jake exclaimed into the radio. "One minute he's just standing there and then he just flipped in the air and landed hard as shit on the ground,"

"Do you see the girl?"

"I don't think - Oh wait, yeah, she's in the doorway. Everybody's outside now,"

"So she's not alone?"

"No, there's like, a bunch of girls and I guess the mom and dad out here,"

"Stay on the house overnight. The moment anything changes, you let me know. Otherwise I will send a few men up to assist you in retrieving her,"

"So staying overnight means I get an extra bonus right?"

Agent Kramer sighed heavily. "Do your job and you will be rewarded. Don't screw this up,"

.

Present

Thirty minutes later El had still not returned from the bathroom and Gabby's rehearsal was wrapping up with the director talking about their upcoming rehearsal schedule.

"How long has she been in there?" Trish asked and Emma shrugged.

"She asked where the bathroom was a little while ago but it seems like she's been in there forever,"

Trish glanced up at the front of the room. It looked like Gabby's director would be talking to them for a while. "We should check on her and make sure she's okay,"

Emma nodded and the two girls ducked out of the room in search of their friend. The halls were empty and silent and when they got to the girls' bathroom, it looked relatively untouched. The lights were off inside and without anyone around to ask, they had no idea where El had gone.

"You wanna look and see if she's down that hall and I'll check the lobby?" Trish suggested and the two split up down the hall but every door they came across was locked and every window they could peer through showed an empty, darkened classroom.

When Gabby came out into the hall along with the rest of her cast mates, she tracked Trish and Emma down.

"What are you guys doing?" She asked, mildly confused.

Trish shrugged. "We don't know where El is,"

"We think maybe she got lost looking for the bathroom," Emma said uncertainly. "But all these doors are locked,"

"Oh," Gabby blinked. "Okay, uh, well, the school isn't that big. Did you guys look and see if she went outside?"

Emma shook her head, "I can check,"

"Okay, and then Trish and I can split up in here," Gabby said, then turned to Trish. "I'll check the second floor and you finish this one?"

"Works for me," Trish nodded.

.....

The first thing she noticed was that her head hurt. A lot. She felt dizzy and nauseated even before she could fully open her eyes. She felt something wrapped around her wrists and when she moved, she could only go so far. As her vision slowly came into focus, she realized she recognized this room.

The white concrete block walls and the square ceiling tiles that she'd counted more times than she could remember when she'd been left in this room for days. A silver table lamp sat on the table to her right and she shifted against the uncomfortable twin mattress and the springs that prodded at her back.

"No..." El whimpered, realizing what must have happened. "No!"

There was no blanket over her and she could see that her wrists and

ankles had been strapped down, making it impossible for her to do anything more than thrash about wildly at them. While she couldn't see it, she recognized the feel of the EKG helmet over her head and she tried to shake it off but it was more securely attached than she remembered it being before. There were electrodes taped all over her body and the wires connected to the helmet on her head and a machine next to the bed. She could hear the painfully familiar sound of it printing out readings on her brain activity. How could this be happening? This couldn't be real. It had to be a dream. A very bad dream.

The metal door to her right was closed and she glanced over her head to see the edges of a piece of paper still taped to the wall. She didn't need to see it in full to know what it was or where she was. This was her old room and that was the drawing she had made of her and 'Papa', before she'd escaped and realized there were people out there who really cared for her - not in the manipulative way that Papa did but in a genuine way that made her feel like she was on equal footing, like she was safe and secure.

El turned her focus to the straps binding her wrists. She had to get out of here. She didn't know if anyone was already looking for her or how long she had been asleep but she needed to do something. She had to get away. As soon as she began to pool her mental energy, however, a sharp shock wracked her body and the pain took her breath away. The skin under each of the places where electrodes were taped burned and tears slid out of the corners of her eyes. Three electrodes were taped to each leg, two on her stomach, three on each arm, and at least a couple more on her back - she felt trapped, like a wild animal and she desperately attempted to use her powers to free herself from this ensnarement but each time she did, she was shocked again and again. Each shock exhausted her more than the last and she cried at the dull rush of pain that continued to cramp and throb and burn and tingle.

After a minute of this, the metal door to her room opened and three orderlies entered, immediately setting her blood to boiling. More than anyone, these men in white had been the ones to torment her the most. When Papa wasn't around, and sometimes even if he was, they had pushed her, hit her, and thrown her. Her first memories

involved being smacked across the face as young men in white laughed and tossed her into the isolation room like a broom being returned to a supply closet. They always laughed, they always thought it was funny, the things they did to her. She knew that out of all of the employees at the lab, they ranked the lowest and as a result, probably didn't care too much about how they handled her. Papa replaced the orderlies on a regular basis. Sometimes they left on their own, sometimes 'accidents' happened and they needed to be explained away, and sometimes they were promoted and started wearing fancy suits and shiny shoes that hurt when they kicked her.

Without saying a word to her, the orderlies came in and surrounded her bed. El thrashed more violently against her straps, glaring at the men as the two closest to her chuckled at her struggle.

"You might wanna calm down," One of them said but El wasn't having it. She didn't want this man anywhere near her and she tilted her gaze, glowering at him, but the moment she attempted to throw him back into the wall, another current surged through her body. She gasped at the pain and leaned over to cough up spittle as the man she'd directed her anger at laughed and leaned over the machine, turning a dial farther to the right.

"Keep trying that and see where it gets you," He warned with a fake smile as the orderly next to him chuckled, shaking his head. The third orderly was still standing close to the door with his arms crossed and he didn't look happy. "This thing goes up to 30,000 volts so I wouldn't press your luck,"

They were interrupted by the heavy metal door opening and El's heart sank into her stomach seeing her Papa for the first time again in months. Two men in suits followed him in but kept their distance as Papa approached El's bedside.

"Welcome home, Eleven," Papa said in that voice that once made her feel comforted but now she could hear all of the deception and coldness beneath his seemingly kind words. There had been a time when she waited earnestly, even sought out, moments in which he would speak to her in such a tone. She spent so much time by herself and he was the only one who gave her any reasonable semblance of affection that she had craved it, eagerly seeking his approval in

everything she did. Now it felt like a lie. All of it felt like a lie and it made her stomach hurt.

"You can go," One of the men in suits said to the orderlies and the men in white filed out of the room one by one as one of Dr. Brenner's lead researchers appeared at the doorway.

"Sir," He said, addressing Dr. Brenner and all eyes turned to him momentarily. "I'm sorry to interrupt but may I speak with you regarding... erm..." He glanced behind Dr. Brenner at El, then at the agent standing in the doorway looking at him impatiently. "We're having difficulty in the nursery lab. The... creatures are becoming more difficult to control,"

"Have any of them escaped since the last time?" Dr. Brenner inquired curiously. If he was concerned, it wasn't apparent on his face.

"No, sir," The researcher shook his head. "But we are concerned at the rapid rate at which they are growing and -"

"Has anyone been attacked or injured?"

"N-No, not yet,"

"Are they still confined appropriately?"

"For now, sir, but -"

"Then this doesn't appear to be an emergency," Dr. Brenner chuckled. "I'm sure the nursery is in good hands under your command,"

"I-"

"I will check in with you when I'm finished here," Dr. Brenner said pointedly. "For now, if there is any work to be done, I suggest you tend to it,"

The researcher opened his mouth to protest but thought it wiser not to continue and instead turned around and walked out as quickly as he had appeared. With the distraction gone, Dr. Brenner turned his focus back to El.

"It took us a long time to find you, Eleven," He said, sitting down on her bed as he had so many times before. "I understand why you may be scared but I promise you, there is nothing to be afraid of," It made El feel sick to hear her Papa use the word 'promise'. He didn't know what that meant. Promises were things you didn't break and his words were as empty as his affection and care for her. "I'm sure you're wondering what all of this is for," He gestured to the straps, wires, and electrodes adorning her thin frame. She hadn't even realized until this moment that she was in a hospital gown again. What had they done with her pretty clothes? Would she ever have pretty things again? Everything was so wrong!

"I'm afraid it's for your own good," Papa continued. "Now Eleven, listen to me. This is very important. For the time being, you are *not* permitted to use your powers. Do you understand?" He waited a beat but she didn't respond, instead staring angrily at the wall in front of her. "If you do," He went on, undeterred. "They will shock you and it will hurt. I know you've felt this already and I don't want that to happen, do you understand? You must stay calm and in time, we can go back to how things used to be," He looked up, smiling at the picture above her bed. "Remember?" He asked, pulling the drawing off the wall and holding it up for her to see but she refused to look. "Remember, Eleven?" He repeated but she kept her brow furrowed and her head turned in the opposite direction. "Very well..." Papa tutted. "I understand that you're upset but that world out there -" He gestured vaguely outward. "- it's not safe for someone like you and your gifts, Eleven. You're safe *here*," He stood up, replacing the drawing to the wall. "I forgive you for running away but now you need to rest. Be good, and the electrodes will go away,"

El watched with a conflicting combination of disdain and despondency as her Papa calmly exited the room without looking back at her once. When she heard the door close and the metal lock shift, she sank back into the bed. Every fleeting ounce of adrenaline and anger she had had was now drained and all she could think of was that she was trapped and everything she had been afraid of was coming true. She'd lost everything - her real family, her surrogate Hawkins family, her new Clarksville friends. Her safety and security, her freedom and the ability to think and feel - to be treated like a person instead of a tool or a weapon. Mike and everyone else never

forced her to use her powers for their gain. They'd showed her that life could be so much more than endless concrete walls, isolation tanks, and hospital gowns day after day. Now all of that was gone and without her powers... without some way to connect with them... she was stuck.

.....

By the time Hopper had heard about El's disappearance, several hours had already passed. After the girls had scoured Clarksville Middle with no sign of El, they'd begun to actually get worried. When Emma's mom arrived at the school to pick them up, they'd frantically explained the situation to her and she had in turn, contacted the local police and then Hopper.

Flo had gotten the news first. Hopper hadn't left a phone number to contact in case of emergencies so she attempted the only place she could think the Hawkins Chief of Police might be - the police station. Hopper had been halfway to Finksburg to check in with his buddy that was supposed to take El in when Flo's voice came through his radio.

"Chief, I've got some bad news," She'd said and while a part of him had been keeping himself ready for anything to go wrong with El's situation for the past couple months now, hearing the words still came as a shock. "There's a woman in Clarksville who says the kid she's watching... your *niece*, has gone missing?" Flo sounded rightfully confused; he'd kept her in the dark throughout all of this.

Hopper grimaced. He'd been trying to keep information about El off of all air waves and phone lines but if El was truly missing, he knew in his gut where she was so secrecy didn't matter as much anymore. If everything was actually out in the open and the lab had found El, all bets were off and he needed to get back to Hawkins right away.

.....

Time seemed to drag on and without any way to sense just how much had passed, El could only base her knowledge on the way her eyelids became heavier and her body wanted nothing more than to rest.

She could periodically hear the faint sounds of chatter as employees passed her door, presumably going home. From what she remembered, they all usually seemed to leave around the same time most days, including the weekends.

It was already starting to feel as though she'd never left. As though her time spent outside the lab and in the company of Mike and the others had been nothing more than a blissful dream, wishful thinking, a reprieve she'd concocted in her mind just like all the others she'd imagined growing up. She'd never thought up anything as wonderful and awe-inspiring as her life for the past several weeks though. Nothing she'd ever imagined growing up compared to shopping with Nancy, drawing with Will, jokes with Dustin, sleepovers with her girl friends, or learning about butterflies with Mike.

Unfortunately for El, every time she drifted off to sleep, her mind subconsciously sought out Mike and the resulting electric shock woke her up with a frenzied rush of pain each time. Whimpering as the cramping and tenseness subsided, she turned her head to the side, desperately wishing she could pull a pillow over her head and shut out the bright light that was still shining over her.

"This isn't right," She heard someone mumble and immediately lifted her head to see one of the orderlies from before sitting in a chair in the corner, presumably guarding her. He had strawberry blonde hair and looked young compared to some of the other men in white. His eyes were brown and soft and he looked uncomfortable as he sat with a stun gun loosely held in his hands. "Oh shit, sorry, uh..." He looked around nervously as El eyed him with suspicion.

"My name's Fred," The young orderly offered awkwardly. "Er, 'Freddie' to most people..."

El wasn't interested in chit chat and exhaled sharply, ignoring the burning sensation she felt under each of the electrode patches. She could see the skin surrounding each patch was red so she could only imagine what the area directly connecting with the electrode looked like.

"I..." Freddie hesitated, drawing some slight curiosity out of El. While

she hated the men in white, she had to admit that this one seemed different. Aside from his age, he seemed much more uncertain of himself and maybe a little nicer. But looks could be deceiving. "Are you okay?"

This question caught her off-guard and she turned her head to look at him. None of the orderlies ever asked how she was doing or if she was "okay". It was strange, to say the least.

"I wish there was something... um..." Freddie continued to talk despite El's silence. "So I heard you have some pretty cool uh, talents..." He said, staring at the straps binding her ankles and the red, swollen areas surrounding the places where her electrodes were attached. "When you aren't... you know, hooked up like this,"

El rolled her eyes and turned her head away again.

Glancing at the door, then at his watch, Freddie stood up from his chair and the sound of his keys jostling and the chair legs scraping against the floor piqued El's interest once again. What was he doing? Why was he talking so much? If he was keeping watch over her, why wasn't he sleeping or reading a magazine? When they didn't *have* to interact with her, the orderlies usually didn't - unless she came across the really mean ones that liked to take their own frustration out on her. But most of the time, they acted as if she didn't exist. This person definitely stood out.

"This thing keeps shocking you in your sleep," Freddie said sympathetically and El watched with fascination as his gaze fell on the machine by her bed.

"Look I -" Freddie said, approaching her bedside and hesitantly walking around to the machine by her bed. "I don't think I'm supposed to be doing this but I have the overnight shift and I just..." El watched him intently as he almost studied the dials and knobs on the machine. "You need to promise you won't try anything if I turn this thing off for a little while - just so you can sleep for a few hours,"

Was he really offering what it sounded like? El weighed this in her mind. Could it be a trap? Ultimately, she wanted to escape, but more presently, she was exhausted and in pain from the almost consistent

electric shocks coming from this machine. Her brain was excessively active when she slept and she was likely reaching out to loved ones in her sleep without realizing it. On the one hand, she could use this opportunity to escape - as soon as Freddie turned the shocks off, she could toss him like a wet rag and make a beeline for the exit. On the other hand, however, she didn't know how many people were still working tonight. All she knew was this little room and the fact that her body was begging for some sort of reprieve from the abuse it was currently enduring.

In a small, suspicious voice, El gave her promise. "Okay,"

Freddie paused, as though not quite trusting her about as much as she didn't quite trust him, but he still flipped a switch on the machine and El watched the little red light next to it turn off.

"For what it's worth," Freddie said in a hushed voice. "I really hate this and I'm sorry. Just... please don't make me regret turning that thing off for the night,"

El nodded, then turned her head to the side, wondering if she really would be able to get a little bit of rest.

.....

Night had fallen by the time Hopper got back to Hawkins and parked at Joyce's house. Jogging up to the door, he knocked sharply and waited an agonizing two minutes before Jonathan came to the door.

"Where's your mother?" Hopper asked as he stepped inside without waiting for an invitation.

"In the kitchen. What -" Jonathan replied, dumbfounded, as he shut the door and followed Hopper's urgent footsteps. "What's going on?"

"Hop?" Joyce was putting leftovers in the fridge when Hopper quickly stepped into the room. "What are you -"

"El's gone," Hopper supplied without waiting another beat. "The lab must have gotten her. I got a call from Emma's mom in Clarksville and she just vanished while they were at some rehearsal or something,"

"Oh god..." Joyce's heart sank into her stomach and her hand flew up to her mouth. "What do we do? We need to find her!"

"I will," Hopper assured. "Keep an eye on the boys. No one leaves, no one goes out looking for her,"

"Looking for who?" Will asked as he came out of his bedroom. "Wait, is El missing?"

"Will, honey," Joyce walked over to him. "We... we think the lab might have found her,"

"So we need to go find her!" Will exclaimed. "What are we waiting for?"

"We' aren't doing anything; *you* are staying here where it's safe and I'm going to the lab to find her," Hopper said sternly.

"Hop, if they've got El, they have to know that we're all involved," Joyce said in a concerned tone.

"Which is exactly why the three of you aren't leaving this house until you hear from me again," Hopper said firmly. "Don't open the doors to anyone and don't go wandering out on your own,"

"Let me come with you," Jonathan pleaded. "I can help,"

"You need to stay with your mother," Hopper said, claspings Jonathan on the shoulder. "Your mother *and* your brother just had surgery. You stay here and keep them safe, got it?"

Jonathan's brows furrowed with concern. "Do you really think any of them are gonna come looking here?"

"Hop..."

"I *mean* it, Joyce," Hopper turned to her and said. "I'll let you know as soon as I have an update,"

"I've gotta tell Mike," Will said under his breath, scurrying off to his bedroom.

"Do *not* let him go out looking for her!" Hopper called down the hall to Will. "You make sure he knows he and the rest of you do not leave your houses unless you hear from me!" Hopper stepped back into the kitchen where Joyce was fumbling to light a cigarette.

Hopper took the lighter from Joyce's trembling hands and lit her cigarette for her. After taking a long drag, she asked, "Do you think she's okay?"

"I really don't know," Hopper admitted. "But I'm stopping at my place to pick up a couple things and then I'm heading to the lab and I'm not leaving without her,"

"You really think they have her..." Joyce breathed, processing. "Oh god, what if they hurt her?"

"Stop it, Joyce," Hopper said, grabbing her shoulders with a gentle firmness. "I'm gonna find her and I'm gonna bring her home - *Here*," He pointed to the floor in front of them. "This ends *tonight*," He turned to Jonathan. "You still have all those weapons and ammo stashed somewhere?" Jonathan reluctantly nodded and Hopper punched him on the shoulder, leaning in. "*Remember what I said*," He gave a pointed look in Joyce's direction and Jonathan swallowed, nodding his understanding.

.....

By sheer dumb luck, Mike had fallen asleep on the living room couch watching a movie. He'd barely gotten any sleep the past few nights and the toll had worn on him. Between his concern for El and the loss of her aunt and mom to the fact that he'd had to say goodbye and didn't know when or if he'd ever see her again, it'd been hard to calm his mind long enough to sleep through the night lately. He'd fought against his exhaustion throughout the school day, catching a brief surge of energy in the mid-afternoon, but after dinner he'd crashed on the sofa and even the hustle and bustle of his family around the house couldn't stir him from his slumber.

As he slept, he found himself in a familiar hallway with a familiar room. White walls and sterile steel doors that sent a chill down his spine. There was no mistaking the girl sitting on the bed in front of

him. Clad in a hospital gown and covered in wires, he didn't want to see her like this.

"El," Mike said, worry encroaching on his voice, making it brittle and soft. "Wh-What are you doing here? Why are you dressed like that?" He hoped she was only showing him a memory.

Her eyes glistened and he felt a sinking in the pit of his chest that made him feel like the floor was dropping out beneath him. "The lab," She said in a small, broken voice. "They found me,"

"No," Mike shook his head, refusing to believe it at first. "No, they couldn't - how did they find you?!"

El shook her head and her eyes brimmed with tears. "Don't know," She whimpered. "They hurt me," She pointed to her arms and legs where red burn patches were scattered up and down each limb in conjunction with the placement of those wires. Seeing the burns and hearing the way her voice wavered overwhelmed Mike with intense anger and an empathetic understanding deeper than he'd ever felt for anyone. It physically hurt him to see her in pain, even in this strange dream world she met him in.

"We'll get you out," Mike said, shaking his head of doubts. "We'll find you and bring you back home, just like before,"

"It's not safe," El's voice was hushed and Mike could hear the voices of men outside the metal door.

"People are watching you?" He inferred and El nodded.

"All night," She said quietly. "When I... when I use..." She trailed off, looking distantly at the floor between them.

"Your powers?" Mike guessed and she nodded, blinking away tears that then slid down her face. He hated seeing her cry.

"They hurt me," She pointed to the places where the electrodes were attached and her skin was raw from the shocks. "So bad," Her voice faltered and Mike sat down on the bed next to her. Up close he could see how her skin around the electrodes had swollen and was an unrecognizable shade of pink and red. When she lifted the stickers

holding the electrodes in place, he could see the blisters that had begun to form and her exposed flesh, the sight of which made him feel sick. Not only due to its gruesome nature, but because this was happening to someone he cared so deeply for.

"It'll be okay, El," Mike said, trying to maintain his own composure and keep his voice steady for her sake. "We'll find you and get you out of there and you will never see any of those bad men again,"

El shook her head. "Not safe," Her lip quivered and she looked up at him with beads of tear drops hanging from her eyelashes.

"I don't care!" Mike protested vehemently. "We did it before and we can do it again,"

"Stuck," El said sadly, her shoulders hanging as her gaze fell to her lap. "They... They want to kill you..."

That knocked the wind out of Mike. "Wh-What? *Me?*"

El nodded, another stream of tears running down her cheeks. "Everyone," She looked at him and the pleading look in her eyes was simultaneously heartbreaking and terrifying. "*Eliminate witnesses*," She repeated the word she had heard earlier that night from outside her door. "*Connected to Eleven*," Her face crumpled at that and she leaned over, burying her head in Mike's shoulder as she cried. "Not safe!" She gripped his shirt tightly and looked up at him again. "*Not Safe.*"

Mike swallowed. "We can't leave you in there," He said, his voice wavering. "We have to get you away from them!"

El didn't respond and instead buried her face in his shirt again. "You can't,"

"No, El," Mike said, pulling her up to look at him. "We're coming. Do you understand? We are coming to get you and you will never see the bad men again,"

She looked down dejectedly and he could tell she was losing hope. She looked exhausted, both physically and emotionally, and the thought of her giving up made him feel even more frantic.

"Listen to me, El!" Mike said, grabbing her attention once again. "You *will* get out of this, okay? I... I won't let anything else bad happen to you. I just... I need to get everyone together and we'll be there. We'll figure something out just - just don't give up, okay?" Her gaze fell again and he shook her shoulders lightly. "Promise me, El," He said, making eye contact and holding it purposefully. "*Promise me,*"

El pursed her lips, blinking away tears from her eyelashes. After a brief pause, she gave a slight nod and whispered almost inaudibly, "Promise,"

.....

"You are not alone, and I am here with you. Though we're far apart, you're always in my heart, for you are not alone..."

.....

[A/N: Is it completely obvious we're heading into the climax? XD Predictions?!]

46. Things Can Only Get Better

[A/N: Hey guys! Wow! Thank you all so much for your kind reviews! *_* I can't even tell you how much they mean to me. You all seriously make my day every time I get a note from one of you and I'm soooo so happy that you're enjoying this fic. :) You're the best!

A few specific comments:

Resisting-Moonlight - I think this chapter should answer your question ;) I'm glad you love Mike and El's subconscious connection!

GeekofNature - I listened to it and I dig it! Thanks for the recommendation! Those lyrics are so on point, too!

Ella - My bad! Thanks for clearing up who you were! I'm really glad you're loving the story though! :D

Guest - Thank you! :) I actually started a 4th of July fic a couple months ago but left it alone to keep working on this. Maybe I'll still finish it once this is done (even though we're far from 4th of July now lol)

falltotemptationx - I will try to update as quickly as possible! Things are about to get super busy for me but the good thing is that I know everything that's happening in the fic from here to the end! It's just making time to write it out lol

Jared Cross - Thank you so much! What a well thought-out and thorough review! I really appreciate it!

ALSO, I just wanna say that as cheesy as this might sound, it sometimes takes me a little bit to get through some chapters because I get so emotionally invested lol I'm squealing as I write fluffy scenes and my heart is racing during the adrenaline-soaked ones XD I'm such a dork lol

ALSO, ALSO, I made a Tumblr page! It's a ghost-town for now but

I'd like to post a lot of other stuff I've made/found/worked on so if you're interested, follow me and all that jazz. My Tumblr handle is also muffinlove03]

Chapter 46: Things Can Only Get Better (by Howard Jones)

We're not scared to lose it all, security throw through the wall. Future dreams we have to realize. A thousand skeptic hands won't keep us from the things we plan, unless we're clinging to the things we prize..."

.....

As Mike's eyes fluttered open, it only took a moment for his adrenaline to seize him and he hopped up to look out the window. His yard was as quiet as it usually was, with the streetlight illuminating the surroundings areas just enough to see there wasn't anyone in the immediate vicinity. Still, he couldn't wait. If what El had told him in the dream was true, then none of them were safe right now.

He could hear his mom in the kitchen washing dishes and talking to Holly as his dad relaxed in the La-Z-Boy beside him, a newspaper over his chest and his head tilted back as he snored. He couldn't tell his parents about this himself, not without wasting time answering questions and risking not being able to go find Eleven.

Scrambling off the couch, Mike raced upstairs and caught himself on the doorway of his sister's room. She had left the door cracked and he could hear she was playing music as he abruptly pushed the door open.

"Mike!" Nancy exclaimed, sitting cross-legged on her bed with a math text and notebook in front of her. "What the hell?!"

"We need to leave," Mike said, out of breath. "Like, *now*,"

"Hold on," Nancy said, pushing her books aside and standing up. "What are you talking about?"

Mike inhaled. "The lab has Eleven and she said they want to kill all of us, as in, *everyone who knows her*. They've got her hooked up to this thing that shocks her and she has burns all over her arms and she was

crying and we need to -"

"Whoa, Mike, slow down," Nancy said, still trying to process what her brother was saying. "You talked to her?"

"Yes! Well, sort of...There isn't *time!*" Mike groaned, beginning to pace. He couldn't keep his anxious energy under control and he needed to move. "We're all in danger! We've gotta get everyone to like, a hotel or something. Somewhere the lab can't find you guys and I've gotta get Eleven out of that place,"

"Okay," Nancy said, her tone immediately changing, and Mike watched with agonizing impatience as she walked over to her closet, retrieving a beat up shoebox from the top shelf. As she lifted the lid to the box, Mike blinked at the sight of the handgun nestled against a dry washcloth.

"Whoa!" He exclaimed, wide-eyed, as Nancy picked the gun up and checked that it was loaded.

"Jonathan let me hold onto it," Nancy explained the question Mike had yet to ask as she grabbed a small backpack from the bottom of her closet. "After everything with Will and the monster, I was still pretty freaked, and he didn't ask for it back," She shrugged. "So what's the plan?"

"*Mike!*" Will's garbled voice came from Mike's room next door and he darted out of Nancy's room to grab his supercom. "*Mike, do you copy? It's Will!*"

"Will!" Mike replied into the supercom, trotting back into Nancy's room. "I'm here, I copy,"

"The lab has El!" Will exclaimed before Mike could say anything else. "Hopper just came and told us and he's on his way there now to get her,"

Mike and Nancy exchanged looks. "I know," Mike replied. "Listen, we've gotta get everybody away from here. El said the lab people are coming to kill everybody who's connected to Will so that means *all of us*. Tell Jonathan to have all of you meet us at the corner of Elm and

Magnolia and we'll be there soon. Over and out!" Mike pushed the supercom's antenna down as Nancy was slipping into a jacket.

"Did you tell mom and dad?" She asked and Mike shook his head.

"No," He admitted, bouncing nervously on his heels.

"And you're sure El said the lab was coming for *us*?" Nancy asked, pulling her backpack straps over her shoulders.

Mike nodded, having a difficult time staying focused when all he wanted to do was get on his bike and pedal as fast as he could to the lab. "We've gotta get everybody somewhere far away that the lab doesn't know about but I told El I would get her out of the lab," He didn't want to speak the words that encircled his mind like vultures. *What if we're already too late?*

"Okay, how about this," Nancy said calmly, sensing how worked up her brother was getting. "I'll take care of mom and dad. You go meet up with your friends and Hopper and get El,"

"You're sure?" Mike asked, surprised, but Nancy waved him away.

"Yes, now *go*!"

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"*Mom!*" Will burst out of his room as soon as his conversation with Mike ended. "*Jonathan!*"

"What?"

"What is it?"

Both sets of eyes stared at him with concern as he ran into the living room.

"The lab is coming after everyone connected to El," Will explained in a rush. "We've gotta get out of here *now*,"

"Hold on a second -" Joyce began but Will kept going.

"Mike talked to El," He blurted out and Joyce's eyebrows lifted with surprise. "They're like, torturing her and she said they plan to kill everyone who knows about her,"

"Where's Mike now?" Jonathan asked, standing up from the couch.

"He said for us to meet him at Elm and Magnolia," Will replied, looking between his mom and brother. "All three of us,"

Joyce held a hand over her mouth in disbelief. "Hopper said -"

"Screw what Hopper said," Jonathan cut her off, earning a disapproving yet surprised look. "The lab obviously knows who's connected to El and if we wait here, we're sitting ducks,"

"I don't think we have time, Mom," Will added more gently and Joyce considered this. Truthfully, she wanted nothing more than to go back to the lab and retrieve El herself. She trusted Hopper but at the same time, she needed to make a decision now based on the new information she was getting. To her, El was like part of the family now and she wanted nothing more than her brought home safe and sound but at the same time, she had to think about the safety of her boys.

"And," Will piped up uncertainly. "And, I think I can help,"

Both his brother and mother eyed him curiously.

"How exactly?" Joyce asked, one eyebrow raised. She didn't like the strange tone Will had used.

"I..." He sighed. "I've still been going in and out of the Upside Down since the hospital -" He admitted, then before either could react, he quickly added, "- but I think I can control it!"

"How?" Jonathan asked.

"Every time it's happened before, it's because I've been scared or upset, like when I was throwing up those slugs," Will explained. "Every time that happened, I'd suddenly be in the Upside Down and it wasn't until I stopped freaking out that I came back,"

"So it's connected to your emotions," Jonathan surmised and Will nodded.

"Basically. I think so,"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Joyce said, shaking her head. "But there is no way in hell you are going back to that place," Then her tone changed to one of disappointment. "Why didn't you tell me this was still happening? We *just* had this discussion when you were in the *hospital*, Will!"

"I know, I'm sorry!" Will said quickly. "It's only happened a couple times and I was going to tell you guys, I swear,"

Joyce inhaled, pursing her lips. "I still don't want you going back there," She said firmly and Will's face fell with reluctant resignation.

"If Mike's waiting for us, we should leave now," Jonathan said, taking the opportunity to redirect them back to the task at hand. "For all we know, if the lab is actually coming after all of us, Hopper could be in trouble, too,"

Joyce took a moment to consider this. If what Will had heard was true, she needed to get her boys somewhere safe while Hopper went in to get El. He had the best chance of rescuing her, given his insider access to the lab, but if he was also a target, they couldn't let him handle this alone - no matter how bull-headed he insisted on being. "Okay," Joyce nodded, grabbing her keys from the coffee table. "Get your things and let's go,"

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The woods surrounding his trailer were dark and quiet when Hopper pulled up in front of the modest home, his SUV's tires screeching slightly as they came to a stop. He'd been on his way down to Finksburg earlier to visit his friend, the man who had graciously agreed to take El in temporarily, so he was still dressed in his plain, off-duty clothes. Of all days to leave his gun at home, it would be the day he needed it most.

Hopper checked the area surrounding his vehicle before getting out,

making sure he wouldn't be ambushed as soon as he opened the door. After a brief, tense pause, he saw nothing out of the ordinary but still exited the SUV prepared to fight if need be. He may not have had his gun on him but that wasn't the only weapon he had at his disposal. When he stepped out onto the makeshift dirt driveway, the only sound that greeted him was an owl hooting somewhere in the dark expanse of trees. The only light came from a half-moon's shine bouncing off the lake behind his house and the air was crisp with the chill of nature's gradual transition from winter to spring. He made his way up to the door of his trailer, looking over his shoulder the entire time as he unlocked the door and stepped inside.

All of the lights were off and he locked the door behind him before turning the kitchen light on and pausing to release the breath he'd been holding. Maybe the lab wasn't quite on his tail yet but he needed to be prepared for the worst. He'd left his gun in a safe in the bedroom and he quickly crossed through the narrow home to get to it.

As he turned the dial on the lock of his safe, he couldn't help but run through worst case scenarios in his head. Working under the assumption that El had indeed been abducted by the lab, who knows what they may be doing or have already done to her. Hopper couldn't help the familiar sting of guilt that settled in the pit of his stomach as he threw open the door to his safe and grabbed his gun. Could his decisions have put El in more jeopardy than if she would have stayed at the Byers' all along? He'd only been trying to keep her and everyone else safe, knowing full-well the extent of the lab's underhanded ways. How striking it was, the familiarity of this guilt as he reflected on Sarah's last moments. His decisions, in a vain attempt at saving her life, had actually cost it and the déjà vu was unnerving to say the least. He did his best to push those thoughts out of his head with little success, though they galvanized him even more so in his desire to rescue El by any means necessary. He'd meant what he said to Joyce - this would end tonight. He wasn't sure how yet, but he wouldn't let anything happen to that little girl. He'd let her down before - not again.

As he made connections between El and his own daughter, a thought gnawed at him that had been silently omnipresent throughout all of

his dealings with the lab. Sarah had received her treatment through Hawkins National Laboratory. It seemed strange and a little *too* coincidental that El just so happened to be the unfortunate captive of the same institution that tried and failed to treat his daughter's cancer.

He would have more time to mull this over on his way to the lab; for now, the adrenaline coursing through him was enough to keep him going. Hopper quickly strung his police belt through his belt loops and settled his gun in its holster. He usually kept extra packs of ammo in the glove compartment of his SUV so he was covered in that department as he peered through the curtain into the front yard. Clear and quiet, just as it had been when he arrived.

Hopper grabbed his keys from the table where he'd left them and stepped out onto the metal steps. The air was unusually calm without even a hint of a gust of wind, making it feel a little less chilly than it otherwise would during this time of year.

He never heard even a rustling in the grass, nor did he see a flash of movement, before a sharp pain struck him in the neck. Immediately realizing he'd been shot with some sort of dart, he yanked the small needle out of his neck but it was too late. As he reached for his gun, his arms suddenly felt loose and far away from him. Where had it come from? There was no one in his field of view and he darted his head back and forth looking for the sniper.

"Son of a bitch," He slurred as his vision became hazy and he saw a handful of men in suits emerge from the shadows of the woods.

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Mike's calves were burning as he raced through the lamp-lit neighborhood streets. The sound of his bike tires spinning madly and wind whipping past his face and blowing his hair were the only things he heard amongst the thoughts running through his head. His backpack jostled against him as he pedalled and all he could picture was El in that hospital gown, in that tiny room - the same one he had seen first-hand when they went to the lab in search of the portal to rescue her just a couple months ago. The images of El on those security tapes still haunted him and every time he closed his eyes,

even for a split second, he saw her covered in wires, being grabbed and pushed and pulled, forced to use her powers against her will. It made him furious and sickened to think about the way she'd been treated her whole life and how she was *currently* being treated on top of it. He couldn't stop thinking about the burns on her arms and the way she cried in the dream so he tried to focus on the way it felt to pedal faster and faster. His legs felt a little wobbly, a little tired, but he kept pushing. They didn't have time to waste.

He'd radioed Lucas after talking to Will and Lucas had said he would get Dustin. Nancy had given Mike a couple minutes head start - enough time to slip out of the house through the basement door and be on his way before she would alert their parents to the need to leave. How she was going to do that, he wasn't sure, but Nancy had certainly proven to be a lot more capable than he'd given her credit for a few months ago. If everything went according to plan, they should be fine. The lab wouldn't find them, their loved ones would be safe, and they'd be able to rescue Eleven. All they needed was time - something they had no way of quantifying so they could only assume they didn't have enough.

As Mike approached the downward slope in the road that would take him to the corner of Elm and Magnolia, he let his feet off the pedals, giving his calves a brief reprieve as gravity pulled him the remaining distance to the street corner. Lucas got to the corner just seconds before him, having come from the adjacent street.

"Hey,"

"Hey, where's Dustin?" Mike asked but Lucas didn't need to respond before the two could hear the sound of another set of rubber tires approaching from the hill Mike had just descended.

Panting, Dustin put his feet down to steady his bike as he came to a stop between them. "This is mental," He said between breaths, shaking his head.

Lucas looked to Mike, "So what's the plan?"

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As the drugs quickly worked their way into Hopper's system, he eventually lost control of his body and fell unconscious, toppling over and down the few metal steps of his modest trailer. He hit the ground hard as several agents approached him casually, clearly unfazed and expecting his response to the drug. One of the men, dressed in a navy blue suit, carried a large tranquilizer gun at his side, equipped with small darts carrying the same concoctions they'd used to incapacitate him and others before.

"Well done," Dr. Brenner said, his hands in his pockets as he stepped up to Hopper's slumped body.

"Thank you, sir," The man with the navy suit replied humbly as another drew a gun from his belt, aiming it at Hopper's head.

"Not yet," Dr. Brenner commanded, putting a hand over the gun's barrel and forcibly lowering it to the ground. "Take him back to the lab,"

Agent Kramer stepped forward, motioning for the other agents to assist him in lifting Hopper's weight. "Give me a hand here, would ya?"

"Agent Kramer," Dr. Brenner said, giving his subordinate pause. "Do you have a plan in place for our next steps?"

"I do," Agent Kramer nodded confidently. "Once we finish here, we'll be splitting up to cover all known contacts of the girl. I expect we'll finish before dawn,"

"Good," Dr. Brenner said, pleased, then looked at the agents clumsily dragging Hopper's limp form across the yard to where several unmarked black vans had pulled up. "I'll escort this one back to the lab for a little chat," He said, his eyes cold and distant as he watched the men load Hopper into the backseat of one of the vans. "I look forward to good news from you,"

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"Will should be here soon," Mike said, looking at his watch anxiously. All around them were darkened streets and trees with splotches of

light from streetlamps lining the asphalt. "Nancy's gonna take my mom and dad to this motel at the edge of Hawkins and once Will and his mom and Jonathan get here, Jonathan can go take their mom and meet Nancy and my parents there. That way everyone's together and then the four of us can go look for El,"

"What about *our* parents?" Dustin glanced between Lucas and Mike.

"The lab doesn't know our parents," Lucas answered for Mike, clearly not concerned. "They know *his*," He jerked a thumb at Mike. "And they know Will's. Our parents don't have anything to do with El,"

Dustin made a face, still a little unnerved but accepting this as two bright headlights appeared from around the corner, headed straight toward them.

"Is that Will?" Lucas asked as the car got closer, the vague silhouette of its shape barely visible beyond the beaming lights.

"Yeah," Mike said, then mumbled under his breath. "I hope so,"

The car pulled up along the edge of the road, close to where the boys stood with their bikes, and when the engine quieted and the lights went off, they exhaled in relief as Will, Jonathan, and Joyce became visible through the car's windows.

"Hey," Will said as the three of them exited the car and Jonathan went around to the trunk to unload Will's bike.

"Hey," Mike, Dustin, and Lucas echoed in response as they waited.

"Where's Nancy?" Jonathan asked as Will walked his bike over to the group.

"She's taking our parents up to that motel at the edge of town," Mike explained. "Before you get to Curley,"

Joyce glanced at her younger son as he sat mounted on his bike, still not happy with the idea of him riding yet, though his incisions had healed enough to make it safe. "Okay, so what exactly is going on?"

"El and I..."

"They talk in their dreams," Dustin supplied bluntly. "Literally,"

"Yeah," Mike admitted with a shrug. "She told me the lab people were going to come after everyone that had a connection with her,"

"Anyone who knows her is in danger," Lucas translated.

"Right," Mike nodded. "So that's why we've gotta get everyone somewhere safe, somewhere the lab doesn't know,"

"Did anyone talk to her friends in Clarksville?" Will asked and Mike blinked. He hadn't even thought about them in all this.

"No..." He said reluctantly.

"They're probably in just as much danger then," Will reasoned. "I mean, the lab had no problem going up there and... doing what they did to El's aunt and her mom,"

Mike nodded, "You're right,"

"Should we call them?" Dustin asked and Mike shook his head.

"No," He said, remembering Hopper's reaction to him trying to teach El how to use the phone. "Phones might be tapped; we have to stick to supercoms and face-to-face,"

"They don't have supercoms, do they?" Lucas asked and Dustin interjected before Mike could respond.

"Even if they did, they wouldn't be in range,"

"How about this," Jonathan spoke up. "I'll go meet up with Nancy and then the four of us can go up to Clarksville and get everyone up there someplace safe,"

"Then we can head to the lab and get El," Mike finished, earning nods of agreement from the other boys.

"Guys," Joyce interrupted. "I understand you all are worried and we all want to get El out of that place but Hopper is already on his way there. I don't want any of you putting yourself at any more risk than

you already are,"

"We can't just wait!" Mike protested amidst a chorus of agreement from the boys.

"What if Hopper gets captured, too?"

"What else are we supposed to do?"

"What if he needs help?"

"Mom," Jonathan said, putting a hand on his mom's shoulder. "We'll be okay but if what Mike's saying is true, then either way, we can't just sit and wait for Hopper. Look what happened when you guys went up there to get Will by yourselves before - you both were almost killed. If we're gonna get through this, we have to do it together,"

Joyce pursed her lips, looking at her eldest with reluctant resignation. When did he get such a good head on his shoulders? While she hated to admit it, he was right and if the lab was actually coming after everyone tonight, they needed to use whatever abilities and power they had as a group to keep themselves safe and rescue El. She hated the thought of putting her babies in danger but with her newfound realizations, came additional worry for Hopper. What if he really was taking too much on himself? He'd gotten them out of a dire situation with the lab before but was he really lucky enough to do it again if it came to that?

"Okay," Joyce sighed, hoping they weren't making a huge mistake but trusting in her boys. "Okay, Jonathan, if you're going up to Clarksville, why don't you drive me back to the house and I'll get my car. I'll come back and pick you boys up and then we can figure out what we're going to do about El and the lab, okay?"

"But we already have our bikes," Lucas said.

"We could just go," Dustin added and the look Joyce shot him was enough to freeze him in place.

"We do this together or we don't do it at all," She said firmly. "You boys can't go up there on your own, not without me or Hopper, do you understand that?"

"But if Hopper's already there -" Mike began to protest.

"And if he's not?" Joyce countered. "And you run into these agents with no weapons and no one to protect you? I don't think so. Wait *here*, keep yourselves hidden until I get back," She looked to her oldest. "Jonathan and I can stop by Hopper's place on the way and if he hasn't left for the lab yet, I'll tell him to meet me here and all of us can go together,"

The boys exchanged reluctant looks amongst themselves. It didn't seem like Will's mom was budging anytime soon. It'd been hard enough to convince her to let them go in the first place. While they could understand she was worried, it still wasn't enough to stop them from wanting to take action. Still, they reluctantly agreed to her terms and she and Jonathan climbed back into the car, peeling away from the curb and disappearing down the road.

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There was no telling how much time had passed. After dark, the lab became much quieter as more than half of the regular employees went home for the day, unaware of what went on after hours.

Though he knew it wasn't particularly late, he'd been working since 6 am that morning and Freddie could barely keep his eyes open. El had fallen asleep an hour ago with no signs of activity and no electric shocks since he'd turned the machine off for her. It was hard to look at this little girl and not feel the immense guilt that came along with being part of the system that was doing this to her. How had he gotten roped into something so screwed up? Sure, he needed the money, but was it really worth all *this*?

The sound of metal shifting against metal as the door unlocked brought Freddie to immediate attention and he looked back to see Jake enter just as El lifted her head. She was still strapped to the bed and unable to sit up.

He laughed and Freddie reflexively rolled his eyes. "What, do they have you on babysitting duty, *again*?" Jake walked up to El's bedside and Freddie noticed a pair of clippers in his hand, the cord dangling almost to the floor. El noticed, too, her gaze settling on the all-too-

familiar machine that always took her hair away.

"What are you doing here, Jake?" Freddie asked, unamused. He'd grown to distrust his roommate more and more after taking this job. He'd always thought he was a bit 'off' but some of the things he'd seen him do went beyond that. "I thought you were off on a job,"

"Jealous?" He chuckled as El glared at him. "Yeah, we picked the guy up a little while ago and just brought him back so I figured I'd see how my buddy Freddie's doin'," He shot an insincere smile at Freddie before turning back to El. "Larry said he's not getting a good read on this girl's EKG - probably 'cause of all this hair," He reached to touch the short locks on El's head but she leaned away, out of his grasp.

"What are you talking about?" Freddie asked, annoyed. "The print out's right there," He pointed to the layers of paper on the floor.

"He's got the wires split or some shit so there's another print out in the control room, numb-nuts," Jake shot back. "So I told him, it's probably because of all this hair," He once again reached for El's head, this time catching a brief brush against a soft brown tuft by El's ear and she recoiled at the contact.

"No," She said firmly, her brow furrowing as she scowled at him. His laughter was mildly unnerving.

"No?" Jake smirked. "Aren't you feisty?" He walked around the bed to the outlets where the EKG and other machines were plugged in as he unraveled the cord from around the clippers. "Good thing those straps look nice and tight - I wouldn't want you to move too much while we shave that mop off your head," As he reached over to plug the clippers into the wall, he noticed one of the machines at his eye-level was turned off. "Hey," He said curiously and Freddie immediately realized what he was noticing. "What's this light doing off?"

"What are you talking about?" Freddie asked, forcing the same irritated tone he typically used with Jake.

He studied the machines a moment longer before a dark chuckle escaped him and El realized laughter wasn't always a happy thing. "You turned off the shocks," Jake said, looking back at Freddie who

had yet to formulate an explanation better than feigning ignorance. "You *did*!" Jake guffawed and Freddie steeled himself, unsure what to do now that he'd obviously been caught. Would Jake rat him out?

"Th-They kept going off all night," Freddie hastily explained. "Even when she was asleep!"

"Oh god!" Jake said with a laugh and a knowing look. "You're even more of a chump than I thought," He shook his head with condescending disappointment. "Well, luckily for you," He quickly reached over and flipped the switch back on as El watched in horror. "No one else has to know what a pussy you are," As the machine buzzed and whirred back to life, El's heart sank, anticipating the inevitable pain she would experience if she used her powers again. He'd been so quick, why couldn't she have stopped him before he could flip that switch?

Jake then turned the clippers on and the sound they made sent a jolt of fear through El. They never hurt - not unless the orderlies tried to hurt her with them - but they still signified the lack of agency she had in this place. "Now, are you gonna hold your head still or does your buddy Freddie need to help you?" Jake asked El and she glanced over at Freddie, frightened.

"Leave her alone, man," Freddie said weakly. "She barely has any hair as it is; I doubt that's what's causing whatever problems Larry's having with the readings,"

"Hmm..." Jake considered this. "Maybe," He shrugged. "But I like to be thorough," He reached over to El and despite her attempts at jerking her head away, he still managed to swipe a thick lock of hair from her head. El looked down, teary-eyed, as the hair rolled down her arm and fell to the mattress.

"NO!" El screamed, swinging her head back and forth in an attempt to dodge Jake's advances but this didn't deter him. Instead, he continued to swipe at her, cutting off uneven chunks of hair and sometimes scraping and scratching and banging the clippers against her head in the struggle. "This would be a *lot* easier if you...would stop...moving!" He said through gritted teeth, getting frustrated as he took a vindictive swipe at her head that, rather than cut off any additional

hair, collided the blade of the clippers against a bare patch of scalp and created a gash a couple inches long.

El yelped and Freddie lurched forward, trying to take the clippers from Jake. "Leave her alone, man!" He exclaimed as Jake pushed him roughly. "This is so fucked up!"

"Back off, Freddie!" Jake growled, pulling a concealed gun from the waist of his pants and pointing it at Freddie's chest. "Back the *fuck* off," El froze, her gaze sweeping back and forth between the clippers in front of her face, the gun in Jake's other hand, and Freddie in the corner with his hands up defensively. "You try that again and I'll shoot her," Jake dropped the clippers to the floor and grabbed El by the remaining scruffs of hair still on her head, the end of the barrel directly pressing into her temple.

"Dude, what are you doing?!" Freddie exclaimed. "You're fucking crazy!"

As the two young men continued to yell back and forth at one another, El struggled to calm her breathing. With the nose of a gun to her head, she could think of little more than how quickly she could be killed at any second. Her heartbeat was rapidly thumping in her ears and she felt like she could hardly breathe. Her head felt like it was in a vice, caught between Jake pulling the hair on one side and digging the metal gun into the other side.

"Let her go, Jake!" Freddie exclaimed, his eyes wide with shock and horror. "If anyone finds out you've got a gun to her head -"

"They won't," Jake replied. "If you aren't gonna help then sit down and *shut the fuck up!*"

"Jake, stop -"

"I said sit down!" Jake yelled, aiming the gun back at Freddie and shooting him in the ankle, causing Freddie to groan in pain.

As soon as he moved the gun away from her, El took the opportunity to focus all of her mental energy as quickly as possible. Her body shook and she gritted her teeth against the electric shocks coursing

through her as she quickly jerked her head to the side, snapping Jake's neck and sending him into a heap on the floor. The gun fell from his hand and went off upon hitting the floor, sending another bullet into the wall opposite her bed.

Breathing heavily, El felt a trickle of blood seep from her nose as more drained out of her ears. Her head fell back against the pillows as her body continued to twitch and shake from the shocks and Freddie held his ankle in his hands, rocking back and forth on the floor as blood pooled around his mangled foot.

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As soon as Jonathan's car was out of sight, Dustin looked around at the three other boys.

"We're not actually waiting, right?"

"No way," Mike shook his head, situating himself on his bike and beginning to pedal as the others followed suit.

"The lab's right by my house," Will said, biking alongside Mike. "My mom might see us if we take the normal roads,"

"So we'll take a detour before we get to Mirkwood," Mike reasoned.

The boys raced through neighbor's yards and fields, avoiding the main roads when they could, until they got to the road leading to Mirkwood.

"I had this idea," Will said, a little winded. This was his first time back out on his bike and he didn't have the same level of stamina he'd had before his hospital stay. "About finding El,"

"Yeah?" Mike asked, panting as he pedalled.

"Yeah," Will replied. "I could go into the Upside Down,"

This earned an incredulous look from Mike and all four of them slowed down to a stop at the top of Mirkwood.

"What do you mean?" Mike asked. "You think she's *there*?"

"How would you even get there?" Dustin asked.

"*Why* would you even go there?" Lucas chimed in. "Voluntarily?!"

"It didn't stop happening after the surgery," Will explained. "I've still been kind of, flashing back and forth sometimes but I think I figured out why, or how. I actually told El about it a little while ago,"

"Okay, and?" Lucas pressed.

"It happens whenever I'm scared or freaked out," Will continued.

"Like when you have interdimensional monster babies coming out of your mouth," Dustin surmised humorously.

"Exactly," Will nodded. "But when I calm down, I'm fine, and I come back. I think if I *tried* to go there, then I could maybe get into the lab from the *inside*, find El and come back to the real world. I've never tried to go there on purpose but I could try,"

"Do we even know where to start looking when we get inside?" Dustin asked and Mike turned to look at him.

"Yeah, she's in her old room," He answered. "The one we walked by when we went to get her from the Upside Down,"

"Are you sure you wanna do this, Will?" Lucas asked. "What if you can't get back out this time?"

"I-I dunno," Will admitted with a shrug. "But I've always come back before and I think it's one of the few options we have,"

"He has a point," Dustin said. "El's the badass in this group and she's the one who's the walking, sort-of talking, weapon. We don't even have the wrist-rocket,"

"Actually, I do," Lucas corrected, patting his backpack. "But still,"

"Guns beat slingshots every time," Dustin said pointedly.

"You're sure about this, Will?" Mike asked, looking at his friend with a combination of concern and hope.

Will nodded. "Yeah," He said firmly. "El helped you guys find me when I was trapped; it's the least I can do for her,"

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The commotion from El's room attracted the attention of several orderlies who'd raced down the hall to find one of their own dead on the floor and the other clutching his foot in agony.

"What the hell happened here?" A man, likely in his thirties, stepped into the room as the others stood back in the doorway. "Get him outta here," He directed the other orderlies who proceeded to pull Freddie up and help him out. "The shocks weren't strong enough for you?" He asked El with venom in his voice as he stepped over Jake's body and reached for the dial on the machine causing her electric shocks.

"No!" El cried, her eyes welling with tears. "Please,"

"Sometimes you kids really need to learn things the hard way, don't you?" He said with disdain and as his fingers grabbed the dial and turned, El sucked in a breath, narrowing her eyes at him and sending him flying across the room. She yelped as a stronger current rushed through her body and she turned to the side to vomit across her pillow. Despite her pain and the fluctuating control she had over her body, her adrenaline pushed her forward as the remaining five orderlies rushed in to assist.

El let out a guttural scream as she threw all of the orderlies back into the wall away from her. Their heads smacked against the concrete walls of the room, cracking their skulls and leaving a trail of blood down the wall as they lifelessly slid down to the floor. Still strapped to the bed, El leaned back to catch her breath as the first man managed to stand up and walk shakily over to her.

"You little shit," He said, grabbing her by the throat, holding her down, and causing her eyes to pop open in terror. She coughed and sputtered against his hand, each breath feeling more and more difficult as pain and panic ravaged her entire body. Pooling all of the energy and focus she could, she met his gaze, glaring up at him as his face gradually shifted from vengeful to terrified and his grip on her

neck loosened. Still bound by the leather straps tethering her to the bed, El watched with determination as blood leaked from his eyes and ears before she heard the dull sound of a pop and he fell to the floor with a thud. The resulting electric shocks that ran through her were intense and she shook violently, her limbs trembling and burning as her heart raced. It seemed like it would never stop until the force gradually ebbed and she passed out from the exhaustion and pain.

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The smell of blood was enticing. Being only a short distance down the hall, they could detect it with ease. Nearly full-grown, it was almost impossible to resist the scent of a fresh meal.

The lights were off, sans a small gooseneck lamp over the counter one of the researchers was using to complete paperwork.

The little monsters had grown considerably and were no longer aquatic. The lab had constructed wire metal cages just large enough for each one to crouch with thin slots between the wires - enough space to stick needles in and run tests.

But the smell was so strong, so inviting. Irresistible in comparison to the cold dog food they received on a daily basis. Some of them had broken out of their cages before, making the locks weaker and cluing them in to how to effectively break them again. As the researcher hovered over his work, scribbling notes onto a legal pad, the monsters grew antsy. The more time passed, the stronger the scent became. They hadn't eaten since morning - their normal time - and the instinctual drive to seek out their next meal was powerful.

The researcher barely had time to react. As quickly as he'd heard the sound of wires bending and snapping, he turned around to face the creature. Its face opened up like a flower, rows of teeth glistening with otherworldly saliva as it clamped over the man's head and its brothers and sisters rattled excitedly in their cages.

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"And do you feel scared? I do, but I won't stop and falter. And if we threw

it all away, things can only get better..."

47. Invincible

[A/N: You guys! Ahhhh! I'm sorry for making you wait so long. I've been uber busy the past few weeks (I just got married! :O) and haven't had time to sit down and write. I just spent the entire day on a marathon writing this chapter and while we're SO CLOSE to the end, there's still a couple more chapters to go. I'm thinking I probably won't finish the story before season 2 comes out on Friday :/ Is that terrible? Will you guys still want to read this after Season 2 comes out? Ahhh, my goal was to finish this fic before S2 so I feel kinda bummed even though I'm BEYOND EXCITED for Season 2.

Anyways, thanks for sticking with me on this crazy ride. Please review and let me know what you think and I'll do my best to at LEAST post one more update sometime tomorrow if I can. You guys rock.]

Chapter 47: Invincible (by Pat Benatar)

*"This bloody road remains a mystery, this sudden darkness fills the air.
What are we waiting for? Won't anybody help us?"*

.....

Jonathan and Joyce didn't have much to say as they drove through the quiet neighborhood streets of Hawkins. As they approached the road that would take them past Hopper's trailer, they made idle small talk, both of them lost in their own thoughts about everything that was happening. Joyce was becoming more agitated the longer she thought about the danger everyone was likely in and her uncertainty as to Hopper's ability to handle this mess on his own. Jonathan did his best to focus on the road but his mind swam with a myriad of thoughts - Was Nancy safe? What was Hopper going to do? What would they do if the lab people showed up and attacked them all? He tried to run through every scenario he could think of as they drove up a long, windy road that would eventually lead to Hopper's. Bands of trees lined the scarcely traveled road and being in the dead of winter, they could see straight through some patches of woods to the clearing where Hopper's trailer sat. Everything around them was dark

except for the narrow path the headlights illumined but far across the woods on Joyce's side, they could make out what appeared to be car headlights - a lot of them. Hopper's porchlight was on but they couldn't see much else.

"That doesn't look good," Jonathan commented warily.

"They couldn't have..." Joyce let her voice trail off as she tried to see more but everything was too dark and they were just too far away. As they approached the turn-off that would take them directly to Hopper's driveway, Joyce's gut told her this just wasn't right. "Don't turn," She instructed firmly. "Keep going,"

"Are you sure?" Jonathan asked.

"Yes," She said vehemently. "Go, Jonathan,"

As he passed the turn, Joyce tried once again to see through the trees and darkness and while she wasn't able to see much, she could confirm that the lights they'd seen earlier were definitely from the headlights of at least a half dozen vehicles.

"When we get to the house," Joyce said, her mind whirring as she moved from anxiety to action. "I'll grab my car right away and you head over and meet Nancy and the Wheelers. Don't stop for anything and make sure you hurry. I'll pick up the boys,"

"You guys are gonna go to the lab alone?" Jonathan asked dubiously. "Without Hopper?"

"I-I don't know, Jonathan, but I'm not leaving the boys out there alone another second," She replied, a little too snappy, then composed herself again as Jonathan pulled into their own driveway. "There are too many cars at Hopper's house right now,"

"What does that mean?" Jonathan asked, turning the engine off. "Do you think they found him? Don't they think he's on their side or something?"

"I don't know," Joyce shook her head. "But whatever the reason, it's not good," She patted her jacket pocket to make sure she had her keys and wallet, then popped the passenger door open before turning

to her son. "Listen to me," She said, taking his face in her hands and looking him in the eyes. "Be *careful*. You guys get up to Clarksville, get somewhere safe,"

"I will, Mom," Jonathan said, begrudgingly accepting the way she was holding his face so emphatically. "You, too,"

"I *mean* it, Jonathan," Joyce said, almost trembling. "Don't do anything stupid. Just get out of town and hide until I come get you, okay? Promise me,"

"I promise," Jonathan reluctantly obliged, his words slightly garbled by her hands on his cheeks.

"Okay," Joyce inhaled, pulling him to her to kiss his forehead before climbing out of the car and jogging over to her own.

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As he gradually came to, he could feel beads of sweating sliding down his clammy skin. His neck burned and ached from the dart and he was slumped over a cold, metal table. The air was just cold enough to be uncomfortable and he wondered what had happened to his jacket as he sat in nothing more than an open flannel and an undershirt that was soaked in sweat.

"Welcome back, Chief Hopper," A voice said, dripping with arrogant disdain.

As Hopper's eyes fluttered open and he made sense of his surroundings, he realized he was in some sort of interrogation room in the lab. He recognized the two-way mirror and the lightweight metal table and chairs he'd seen in all of Eleven's experimentation videos. Similar to the rooms he and Joyce had been held captive in a few months ago, it was like *deja vu* being back in this place. A trio of guards flanked the space behind his chair and when he moved, he realized his hands were cuffed to the chair behind his back.

"What the hell is going on?" Hopper asked. He wasn't sure how much they knew so his first mode of action was to maintain the front that he was working with the lab.

Dr. Brenner was seated on the other side of the table and he reached for a pack of cigarettes that Hopper recognized as his own, tapped one out of the pack, and rolled it thoughtfully between his fingers. "Did you really think we wouldn't find out about your involvement with Eleven?"

Hopper watched with a silent glare, waiting for him to say more. It was safer that way.

"We've actually known of your deceit for quite some time," Brenner said nonchalantly. "In the end, however, I suppose I should thank you," He paused, Hopper's unlit cigarette resting between his fingers as he looked up at disheveled police chief. "Despite your plans, you still led us right to her. You and the Wheelers' boy," Dr. Brenner scanned Hopper's face for a reaction but when he got nothing, he looked back at the cigarette. "Between the two of you we were not only able to determine that Eleven had been recovered but that she was with friends and family in Clarksville of all places," Dr. Brenner set the cigarette down on the table and leaned casually on one elbow. "Really, for all of your efforts, to leave the one security tape showing you and those kids taking her from this lab," He tutted, shaking his head. "I would say I was impressed until that point,"

"What do you want?" Hopper growled, realizing there was no point in playing dumb - they obviously knew most, if not the whole story.

"Oh, I have what I want," Dr. Brenner chuckled, standing up. "Eleven is where she belongs and by morning, they won't be a soul in this state who even knows she exists,"

Despite the sinking feeling in his chest and the adrenaline coursing through him, Hopper maintained an even keel. "So what am I doing here? You could've killed me if you wanted to, so what do you want?"

Dr. Brenner looked down at him, the single hanging lamp above them casting shadows across Hopper's face. "In due time," He said darkly, then seamlessly lifted the menacing tone from his voice. "There is some information I'd like from you. It's not required; we have more than enough ways to figure out what we need to know and my men are out looking for them now so it's only a matter of time. However, if you cooperate, I could perhaps impart some information to you as

well,"

"Such as?" Hopper said, unenthused.

"Such as what killed your daughter," Dr. Brenner said, eyeing him intently as he watched Hopper's cold, hard glare falter. "I thought so," He chuckled. "Now, I know you seem to be the ringleader of this whole ridiculous operation so I would assume you know the exact locations of everyone involved with Eleven's escape,"

Hopper's head was spinning at the mention of Sarah. What didn't he know? What was Dr. Brenner holding over him or was this just some sort of ploy to get him to talk? He shook his head, forcing himself out of his harried daze. "What do you know about Sarah?"

Dr. Brenner sat back down, enjoying this game of cat and mouse. "I know that she was terribly sick when you brought her to us for treatment," He said casually, crossing his ankle over one leg.

Hopper eyed Brenner with contempt. Everything inside of him was screaming with rage - the fact he was being held captive, the fact they'd found El and were doing god knows what to her, the fact that he had trusted these bastards with his baby girl only for her to die under their care, and the fact that he was still torn as to who to blame for his daughter's death.

"Your turn," Dr. Brenner said with a confident grin. "Names and addresses for Eleven's friends in Clarksville," One of the guards behind Hopper dropped a notepad and a pen on the table and the pen rolled a bit before stopping.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with these on?" Hopper growled over his shoulder, yanking on the handcuffs as the sound of metal grinding metal echoed in the small room.

"So you agree to the terms?" Dr. Brenner surmised and Hopper spun back around to face him.

After everything that had happened and the sacrifices he'd made, he couldn't do it anymore. He'd made countless mistakes over the years that he would never be able to take back and he'd lived with regret

eating away at his stomach like a flesh-eating virus every day for as long as he could remember.

"Not a chance," Hopper's voice was gravelly and he matched Brenner's confident stare with one of his own.

Brenner eyed him carefully. "Very well," He glanced at the guards behind Hopper, gave a small nod of his head, and one of the guards slammed a taser into the side of Hopper's neck. The jolt caused him to shake violently and saliva dripped from his mouth as his handcuffs rattled against the chair.

.....

"You're sure about this, Will?" Lucas asked as the boys surrounded their friend in the woods by Mirkwood. They'd hidden their bikes under the cover of darkness and trees and now stood warily watching the lights from the Hawkins National Laboratory in the distance beyond the woods.

"Y-Yeah," Will stammered, determined.

"When you get in there, go downstairs," Mike instructed. "There's a lot of big white hallways and I think El's room is near these double doors that lead to the front of the building,"

"What if this doesn't work?" Lucas asked skeptically.

"It'll work," Mike insisted.

"How's he even gonna get her out, though?" Lucas pressed, then turned to Will. "Can you bring El through the Upside Down back with you? Can she escape that way?"

"I don't know," Will admitted, looking down as his heart raced. He was more than a little nervous but undaunted nonetheless. "It's worth a try I guess,"

"At the very least, he can talk to her and let her know we're coming," Mike said. "Maybe he can find out more about how to get her out once he's inside,"

"It's also a hell of a lot easier than Mike playing psychic Sleeping Beauty to get information," Dustin quipped.

"I'm just saying for the record, I don't think this is a good idea," Lucas said, crossing his arms.

"Noted," Dustin rolled his eyes, then clapped Will on the shoulder. "Ready?"

Will swallowed and nodded. "Yeah,"

Mike stepped closer to his friend. "You're sure you're okay with this?" He asked quietly and Will looked up at him earnestly.

"I'm sure," Will said sincerely and he could see the relief flash in Mike's eyes. "I'll see you guys soon," He said, then closed his eyes as his friends took a couple steps back. They weren't sure what to expect but figured they should give him some space.

With his eyes screwed shut, Will focused all of his thoughts on El. He thought about the stories he had heard of her time in the lab and everything Mike had said about how they were hurting her now. He combined his worry for El with thoughts of the Upside Down and the way his heart had raced as he held his breath, hoping the Demogorgon wouldn't notice him every time it passed. He thought about the terror he'd felt when the monster finally burst through Castle Byers and he was too tired and weak to run before everything went black. He thought about how devastated his friends would be, especially Mike, if anything bad happened to El. As he moved through these thoughts, working himself up more and more, he paused to open his eyes and saw the familiar floating particles dancing in front of his face. It had worked! He was alone in this desolate forest once again but before he could rejoice in his success, he felt his heart skip a beat. Several feet away he could see dozens of Demogorgons slowly dragging their elongated limbs through the woods. They were smaller than the one he'd hid from in November but they were still much larger than he was and there were so many of them! Glancing around, they seemed to be everywhere, emerging from the darkness like shadows coming to life. He heard the gut-wrenching croak of one of the creatures from behind him and he stood firmly in place, too afraid to turn around and see where it was

before it passed by him without stopping. He remembered that the Demogorgon had been blind and these monsters seemed to be the same so he relied on silence and stillness to keep himself safe. However, the path to the lab was crawling with these things and there was no way he could walk among them unscathed. He'd hidden from one Demogorgon for a week before it caught him - there was no way he could boldly walk through throngs of them. The more he glanced around, he realized there were too many to count and the woods seemed to be overflowing with these miniature monsters. After a moment, he also noticed that they all seemed to be moving in the same direction, clustering at the lab beyond the trees.

He had to get back to his friends. There was nothing he could do in the Upside Down - not from the woods, at least. He stiffened as another Demogorgon stomped past him, only a few feet away, and he fought with everything in him not to scream or run. There wasn't anywhere to escape to in this place and he was surrounded by unwitting monsters who could destroy him in seconds.

Despite the way his heartbeat pounded in his ears, Will closed his eyes and tried to focus once again. He thought about his friends and being safely back with them. He thought about Jonathan and his mom and how good it felt to be home. His mind wandered, distracted by the anxiety of never getting out of this place and the smell of the monsters' breath in the air, but he brought himself back to a calmer place. He'd gotten out of here before - multiple times, in fact. He'd survived an entire week with a Demogorgon that was fixed on hunting him. He was Will the Wise and he could outsmart them - his mind, while not nearly on El's level, was his most powerful tool. He knew the best places to hide and he knew how to go unnoticed. He could think two steps ahead of the enemy and he could get himself out of this place. His mind had brought him here and he could get himself back home if he focused.

As the thought of home and safety gradually calmed him, Will felt his tension relax, his breathing steady, and suddenly, he fell to the ground with his friends eagerly rushing around him.

"What happened?"

"Are you okay, Will?"

"What did you see?"

Will sat back on his haunches, ignoring the uncomfortable poking and prodding of sticks and tree roots on the forest floor as he caught his breath.

"Demogorgons," Will said sharply, panting. "They're everywhere. The woods are *crawling* with them,"

"Oh shit," Lucas murmured as Dustin clutched his head in his hands, his fingers tangling with his curls.

"This is not good," He muttered, pacing. "This is *so. not. good!* What the hell do we do now?"

"How many did you see?" Mike asked, still kneeling beside Will on the ground.

"There were too many to count," Will replied, then pointed at the outline of the lab beyond the trees. "They were heading toward the lab, though,"

"What the hell does that mean?" Lucas asked warily.

"It *means* we're in deep shit," Dustin retorted, still pacing anxiously.

"Wait a minute," Mike said, realization striking him. "If the portal's still open..."

All three boys' eyes widened.

"Yeah, we're doomed," Dustin said, nodding and pursing his lips.

"Shut up!" Lucas smacked him on the shoulder.

"What?!" Dustin exclaimed. "You're gonna tell me that a whole horde of Demogorgons parading their way to a portal to *our* world isn't the *goddamn Demogorgon apocalypse* waiting to happen?"

"Hold on," Mike said and Dustin wheeled around, waving his arms emphatically.

"Mike, do you realize -"

"Just hold on!" Mike cut him off. "El's still in there and standing around just freaking out isn't gonna help so... so let's just figure something out, okay?!"

"He's right," Lucas shrugged.

"Shut up, Lucas," Dustin deadpanned.

"No, *you* shut up!"

"*Both* of you, shut up!" Mike exclaimed, exasperated. "We need a new plan,"

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Flashback - 1980

The middle school gym was decorated with blue and white balloons and streamers that had been strung from corner to corner. Tinsel was taped to the base of some of the balloons on the wall and dangled freely, shimmering in the dimmed lighting. Music played from the corner of the room as groups of kids danced in the center of the gymnasium floor. Bleachers on each side of the room housed splatterings of students who either needed a break or were too nervous to get up and join their peers.

Jonathan Byers sat on the edge of the highest bleacher seat, his suit with sleeves a little too long for him swallowing him up like a cocoon. In contrast, his pant legs were a little too short and while his mom had tried to reassure him that they gave him a "Michael Jackson-inspired look", he knew that he probably looked ridiculous. He wondered if people could look at him and immediately know without a word how broke his family was. It hadn't helped that he'd had a growth spurt over the summer that had only seemed to affect his height and nothing else. He hadn't been able to fit into his old suit jacket so Joyce had taken him to a thrift shop the day before and this had been the best he could find. It wasn't terrible but the shoulders bunched up and he had to keep pushing the sleeves back to free his hands as he looked at the object he held in his lap.

Almost directly across from him on the other side of the gym was Nancy Wheeler. Her long brown hair was pulled back into a half ponytail and

her natural curls bounced over her shoulders as she looked around the gym at everyone dancing. Beside her, a larger girl with shoulder-length red hair pulled into a bun sat chatting animatedly, eliciting the occasional laugh from her friend.

Jonathan looked down at the photo in his hands. He'd started getting into photography last year when his art teacher did a unit on a subject. Knowing the Byers family didn't have much money and also being an old high school classmate of Joyce's, his teacher had taken it upon herself to buy him a camera for Christmas. It wasn't anything too expensive or elaborate but it gave Jonathan an outlet and he'd cherished it like nothing he'd ever owned before.

He stared at the grainy image and an involuntary smile traced his lips. He remembered the day vividly - he'd gone over to the Wheelers' house to pick up Will. He and his best friends loved to play Dungeons and Dragons for hours on the weekends and their mom had instructed him to walk him home since he was only a little kid at that point and it was the best way to make sure both of them were home in time for dinner.

They'd been wrapped up in a campaign when Mrs. Wheeler let Jonathan into the house and guided him to the basement steps. From the top of the staircase, he could hear the commotion of chatting, laughter, and strange noises coming from the people below. As he plodded down the steps and entered the basement, he saw his little brother with his friends seated around a small table as well as Nancy, Mike's older sister, dressed up as what he could only assume was some sort of elf. She had pointed tips on her ears and a long green cloak as she held a toy bow and arrow at her side.

As Jonathan reminisced on the day, the quick, candid snapshot in his hands, he couldn't help but smile. He'd always thought Nancy was pretty but seeing her playing D&D with their little brothers and their friends made her almost approachable. Almost.

Jonathan looked up from the picture and returned his gaze to Nancy. She was still talking to Barb and while he knew Barb was nice, it still took every ounce of courage he could muster to stand up from his spot on the bleachers and begin his descent down to the gym floor. He'd rehearsed what he would say over and over all afternoon. He'd give her the picture as a gift and ask her to dance. It was so simple so why did he feel like someone had punched him in the stomach when she was still so far away?

As he crossed the gym, throngs of dancing students stepped in and out of his way, halting his progress. He pushed through the crowd of kids, murmuring his words to himself as he could feel his palms getting sweaty. He swapped the photo back and forth in his hands so he could wipe his palms on his pants legs.

"Hey Nancy!" He called out when he thought she was in earshot but everything was still too loud and a couple people stepped in front of him, unaware of his presence. He felt like an idiot but he kept walking.

He had almost reached her when a few girls approached her on the bench, blocking his view. "Nancy, I -" He started to say as he pushed past another student but by the time he squeezed through the last few people in the crowd, it was too late. He watched as she walked away, flanked by friends, and he discreetly stuffed the photo into his pocket.

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The ride up to Clarksville was awkwardly quiet as Nancy's parents sat in the backseat, squeezed in on either side with Holly's car-seat in the middle. They'd gradually given up on asking questions since their daughter had hastily ushered them out of the house and into the family car. While she hadn't been expecting to see Jonathan pull into the motel parking lot just after she and her parents had unlocked the key to their room, she couldn't say she wasn't relieved.

"What exactly is going on here?" Karen had asked, a question that had been repeated at various times by her and her husband ever since their daughter had come rushing down the stairs talking about needing to leave immediately.

"There's no time but we're all in danger," Jonathan had said as he jumped out of his car and threw the door closed behind him. "We've gotta get out of Hawkins; I'll explain in the car," He guided Nancy, gently but firmly, away from the outdoor motel door.

"Young man, I don't think -" Ted had started to protest but Nancy interrupted.

"He's not kidding!" She exclaimed. "I told you; there are some very bad government people after us and everyone who knows Eleven. We

need to get as far away as we can! Her dad is completely psycho and the chief said we need to -"

"So why Clarksville?" Karen asked, adjusting Holly on her hip as the young girl started to fuss. "Shh, it's okay, sweetheart,"

"El has friends up there who are in danger, too," Jonathan explained hastily, yanking his car door open as Nancy scurried over to the passenger seat. Her parents had no choice but to follow, despite their hesitation. "You'll be safer the farther away you are from Hawkins but I need to get up there to warn them,"

"Nancy, this all seems -"

"Mom, just get in the car!" Nancy exclaimed, frustrated, as her mother blinked in surprise at her daughter. "I mean," Nancy exhaled sharply. "Ugh, please, just get in the car,"

For most of the drive, everyone sat in mildly uncomfortable silence. Nancy and Jonathan explained the majority of the situation to her parents, leaving out the part about El's powers, and they seemed to understand the gravity of the situation. Nancy was in the front passenger seat, furiously searching for addresses in the phone book Jonathan had grabbed from his house before he left. The overhead light in the car provided just enough dim illumination to guide her reading and the dog-eared page Mike had left made it easy to find Trish's address.

"I found a couple listings that could be Emma's and Gabby's but I'm not sure," Nancy said with a sigh as she lifted her gaze from the phone book. She was starting to get car sick from reading for so long and when she looked up, she saw a sign that said Clarksville was only three miles away. "I know Gabby lives near Becky's house so I think this might be her address," She said, more to herself than to anyone else since she was the only one who could see the book at the moment. "But Emma's a coin toss,"

"Once we get to Trish's we can check with her," Jonathan said calmly as he merged onto a main road. "She should know where her friends live but we've gotta stop at a motel first and drop your parents off,"

"Excuse me?" Karen spoke up from the backseat, leaning forward. "We're *not* leaving you guys!"

"Mom, there isn't room in the car for us to pick up El's friends *and* have the three of you stay with us, too," Nancy reasoned patiently, turning around in her seat to look at her mom. "We'll be fine, okay? Just, *please*, trust us?"

Karen opened her mouth to protest but Ted put a hand on her shoulder and gave a small shake of his head as Holly looked between the two of them with a confused expression.

"It's okay, Holly," Karen said soothingly to her youngest child. "I know you're tired; we'll be there soon," She said, gently caressing the top of Holly's head as she warily glanced back at Nancy.

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They went unnoticed at first. It was night, after all, and most of the employees who were still on the clock were out looking for any and all of El's known contacts. In the nursery lab, the remains of the lone researcher were strewn across the linoleum floor amidst a large pool of crimson blood. In their excitement, the other monsters had managed to break and mangle their cages enough to escape and were wreaking havoc on the lab in their attempt to leave the room and find more food. Shelves came down and glass beakers were shattered across the floor as the creatures croaked and bellowed their frustration.

By happenstance, another researcher had come to the small lab, nonchalantly whistling as he swiped his keycard and a little ding signaled his entry. Within seconds, he was pummeled by three of the monsters without even having the chance to scream. His limbs were torn from his body and blood sprayed over the walls as they greedily sucked his bones dry. With the door now open, the monsters leapt to freedom, pausing in the hallway as they waited to catch the scent of fresh prey somewhere in the vicinity.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the portal, dozens of Demogorgons were making their way toward the entrance into the lab. They could smell the blood from the various violent incidents that had occurred

in the lab and the scent had drawn them right to it. Researchers studying the portal paused at the sound of their otherworldly moans and chirps before the first clawed arm reached through the portal's fleshy membrane, tearing open a hole large enough to pull its whole body through.

"Hit the alarm!" One of the men yelled up to the control center just as one of the monsters tackled him to the ground, slime oozing from its mouth as it hovered over him. His screams were drowned out when the monster clamped its flower-like mouth over his head as the other lab employees scrambled to get out of the room to no avail.

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El's feet were wet and she recognized the dark void she was standing in, though she'd made no conscious attempt to get there and she didn't think she was in the bath.

You need to wake up, sweetheart.

El whipped her head around to see Terry standing before her, her blue nightgown flowing about as it dipped into the water at her ankles. "M-Mom?" El's voice was hoarse and the word seemed foreign on her lips but somehow no other term seemed appropriate to express the relief she felt at seeing this woman. "Alive?" She quickly closed the space between them, wrapping her arms around Terry in a tight hug.

Yes, I'm alive. Terry nodded, rubbing El's back. *But you need to wake up.*

El shook her head vehemently. "Want to stay," She protested, pouting. "With you,"

I know, baby. Terry said, reaching out and touching El's head, gently caressing the raw spots on her scalp where the clippers had cut her. *But you aren't safe. You're passed out and the lab is swarming with monsters. You need to escape.*

El paused. "How... how did I find you?"

They gave me a medication. Terry explained. *They knew you'd try to*

contact me so they put me to sleep.

El shook her head, confused. "Talk to Mike, when he's sleeping," She said, pointing to her chest as she looked up at her mother.

I know, Jane. Terry said patiently. *It was a different kind of sleep but the medication wore off and you found me. Now you need to leave. Wake up and find a way out of this lab before one of those monsters finds you. Don't stop fighting. I need to know you're gonna be safe.*

"You too?" El questioned, looking up at Terry's stoic expression. "You come, too,"

Terry pursed her lips and gave a gentle shake of her head. *You need to get out first. I'll be okay.*

"No," El said, taken aback. She pulled away from Terry's embrace and looked up at her stubbornly. "You come, too,"

No, sweetheart.

"No!" El exclaimed emphatically, her brow fixing in a frown.

Remember what I told you. Terry said, taking a step back. *The bond between a mother and her baby can never be broken.* She cupped El's face in her hands as a tear escaped El's glistening eyes and her scowl faltered. *We don't always know our own strength until we find something worth being strong for. I need you to be strong right now.*

El shook her head weakly as her lip trembled and more tears slid down her cheeks.

Wake up, Jane. Terry wiped a tear from El's face before her image started to disappear like a smokey mirage. *Wake up.*

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She could still hear the sounds of the Demogorgon screeching and groaning amidst the rapid machine gunfire outside the classroom door. She remembered being surrounded by her friends, doing everything in their power to protect her, but knowing it wasn't enough. They'd never be able to defeat this monster. She remembered

Mike's promises of a new bed all her own and going to the Snowball. She could still feel the soft warmth of his lips on hers when she thought about their quiet moment in the cafeteria before all the chaos.

She'd known there would only be one way to end this - to end the pursuit of the bad people, to end the savage destruction by the Demogorgon. It all started and ended with her. She knew blood attracted it. She knew the way it hunted and the way it feasted. She knew this creature in ways she wasn't sure of and it both frightened and empowered her.

So she'd killed the bad men, killed the evil lady who'd killed her friend - her real father, Benny. She'd squeezed their little brains like play-doh until they popped inside their skulls and blood drained from every orifice in their heads - their eyes, their ears, their noses. And when they all fell down around them in a bloody heap, she knew they were safe. Her friends were safe, but the Demogorgon was coming. She had to be ready; she just needed a little rest.

She remembered someone lifting her off the floor and Mike's frantic voice as she jostled against the person carrying her. Was it Dustin? Yes, Dustin put her down on the table - it had to be Dustin. She remembered the quiet moments of tentative peace as she listened to the remaining agents' attempts to take down the monster. Gunfire and screeches, croaking and yelling. When everything got quiet, she hoped it was over, despite herself.

She didn't flinch when the Demogorgon burst into the room. She'd been waiting, breathing, gathering every last ounce of strength she could muster for one more fight. She was exhausted and everything hurt. Her head was spinning and throbbing and her limbs felt wobbly and weak. She remembered her friends screaming and Lucas launching rocks at the Demogorgon but they were nothing against the monster's thick, armor-like skin.

She remembered rolling off the table and approaching the monster. She remembered the stunned look on Mike's face when he realized what she was doing but she couldn't focus on him now. She had only one objective. She'd brought this monster to their world. She'd brought this monster to this school. There was only one thing

standing between her friends and safety and she had the power to destroy it. Sometimes you don't know your own strength until you find something, or *someone*, worth being strong for.

As El's eyes gradually fluttered open, she took a moment to realize what was happening. She was still strapped to the bed and her body ached with an intense pain that took her breath away. Her arms and legs were covered with raw, open wounds from the electric shocks she'd received and before she could linger on the pain for a moment longer, she looked over at the machine beside her and turned the shocks off. Her body shook with the final, lingering electric current that was sent through her body and as she panted, catching her breath, she could hear screams from the hallway outside her room.

Free from the threat of shocks, she ripped the straps off of her wrists and ankles with her mind before yanking each wire electrode from her body. Some places hurt more than others but she ignored the stinging pull of the adhesive against her skin - it was nothing compared to what her body had been through over the past few hours. She wiped the trickle of blood that dripped from her nose as she clambered out of the bed.

Her heart sank into her stomach as she heard the familiar sound of monsters groaning and croaking outside her door. Men were yelling and she could hear the sound of heavy footsteps running but she wasn't sure if that was the bad men or the monsters. Inhaling deeply and wincing against the pain from her injuries, she gingerly stepped toward the door. When the hallway quieted, her hand trembled as she reached for the handle and slowly turned it, cracking the door the slightest bit. Her breathing shallow and her eyes wide with trepidation, El poked her head out of the door to scan up and down the hall. There was no one in sight but bloody footprints lined the floor and a pool of fresh blood glistened at the end of the hallway. Some of the overhead lights flickered and several ceiling panels had fallen out of place, hanging by wires. She eyed the footsteps outside of her room - larger than any man's and certainly not human. With another deep inhale, El steeled herself, threw open the door and bolted down the hallway.

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"We can't afford to be innocent, stand up and face the enemy. It's a do or die situation. We will be invincible..."

48. I Won't Back Down

[A/N: Hey y'all! It's Stranger Things Day! (It's November 6th XD) So why not post an update? Forgive me if there are any typos, I'm just so hyped to get this posted lol Let me know what you think!

Also thank you to everyone who has been reviewing and favoriting and following. I get so excited when I get a notification and I'm so glad you guys are digging this fic! :) ALSO also, thank you for all the congratulations messages - you guys are so sweet!

To answer some questions, I might do a sequel! It depends on how the inspiration hits. I definitely have had some smaller ideas floating around so we'll see what happens when I finish this story! This has definitely been a huge project for me lol but I don't think I'm done writing for ST. ;)]

Chapter 48: I Won't Back Down (by Tom Petty)

"Well, I won't back down. No, I won't back down. You can stand me up at the gates of hell, but I won't back down..."

.....

The White Elk Motel was a shabby collection of cabin-like rooms spaced out around a lot with overgrown weeds and grass as tall as their knees. There was an elk on the sign by the road with the words "TV" and "Movie" in red below it. The gnarled old man who had checked them in barely looked up from his tiny TV set long enough to accept their payment and hand them the keys to a few rooms.

Getting the girls' families to leave with them hadn't been as difficult as they'd expected. Gabby's dad was still locked up at the local precinct and her mom had been surprisingly receptive to several strangers showing up at her door to tell her they were all in danger and needed to leave their home right away. Gabby had still been staying at Emma's house anyway so her mom had been eager to come along and make sure her daughter would be alright. After everything

that had happened with her husband, she was more galvanized in ensuring Gabby's safety than she'd ever been before. Trish's dad wasn't home and her mom was halfway through a bottle of wine when they picked her up so while she argued and asked questions, she still went along with Jonathan and Nancy's urging to get in the car right away. The girls were all staying with Emma's parents so that had been their last stop. Emma's parents had been a bit more thoughtful and hesitant but when they heard about El's abusive and psychotic "dad" who had ungodly reach into the government, access to weapons, and was on his way to hurt everyone connected to his "daughter", they were on board. They'd had enough of their daughter's friends being terrorized by their families.

It almost seemed like a normal winter night. There was a chill to the air that suggested the grass would be frosted in the morning as Jonathan looked up at the sky. Stratus clouds stretched as far as he could see, beautifully illuminated by the moon's light behind them and the silhouettes of barren tree branches in front of them.

"We can't stay here," Nancy said in a whisper as the two walked side by side, trailing behind the rest of the group as they looked for their assigned cabins.

"What? Why?" Jonathan looked over at her. Her gaze was fixed ahead and he recognized that look in her eye. "What's wrong?"

She glanced over at him, as if it was obvious. "We have to go back and help," She said in a hushed voice. "No one's gonna look for anyone here but our brothers, your mom - they're heading straight into what could be a trap,"

Truth be told, he'd been thinking the same thing on the way up here. "What do we tell them?" He asked, slowing his pace as Trish tested a key in the lock to one of the cabins.

The pair stopped walking in a dirt clearing, around which a cluster of cabins were situated. Emma's parents' car was parked in front of one of them and Jonathan looked through the windows of the cabins at their little group as Nancy weighed the options. They could lie and tell everyone they were going to pick up another of El's friends. They could also tell everyone the truth and risk the barrage of questions,

worry, and discouragement they were liable to encounter. Or maybe they didn't have to choose either of those options.

"I'll take care of it," Nancy slipped out of her backpack and pushed it into Jonathan's hands. "I'll meet you at the car," She said, quickly jogging over to the cabin her parents were in as Jonathan watched, intrigued.

As she trotted up the weathered wooden steps, Nancy could see through the window that her parents were talking. "Jonathan and I are going to make sure everyone else is okay," She blurted out as she abruptly opened their cabin door, startling Karen and Ted. "Keep these closed," She quickly pulled down the window blinds and scurried back over to the door, talking fast so that her mom didn't have the chance to get a word in, let alone recover from her sudden entrance. "Make sure you check on the others and don't open the door unless you know who it is. We'll be back soon and keep this locked," She gestured to the door knob as she started to close the door behind her. "Okay, love you, bye!" She said quickly and pulled the door shut firmly, then ran across the lot to meet Jonathan at his car.

"Let's go," Nancy said as she whipped past him, making a beeline for the car. Jonathan paused for a moment before gathering his senses and hopping into the driver's seat.

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"So what are we supposed to do now?" Lucas asked, crossing his arms.

Mike looked over at Will. "You said they're all headed for the gate?"

Will nodded. "That's what it looked like,"

"Okay," Mike said, his mind whirring as he tried to come up with a new plan. "So... so what if we got you closer to the lab?"

"What good would *that* do?" Lucas asked, skeptical.

Mike shot Lucas an annoyed glare. "Maybe if Will's closer to the lab when he goes into the Upside Down, he can get past the Demogorgons, go in, and find El," He looked at Will again. "Were

they already *at* the gate?"

Will struggled to remember as much detail as he could. "I-I'm not sure," He paused. "But I think they were really close,"

"If they're that close, it's not gonna work," Dustin said. "By the time Will got into the Upside Down, they'd be *right there*. Besides, we can't even get past *this* gate," He gestured to the metal fencing that surrounded the lab. "There's no way he could get close enough in *our* world for it to make a difference in the Upside Down,"

"But what if -" Mike continued but Lucas cut him off.

"It's not gonna work, man!" He exclaimed, exasperated. "We need a completely different plan if we're gonna get to El,"

"Before the Demopocalypse," Dustin added with a nod.

"Demo- *what*?" Lucas turned to Dustin.

"Demopocalypse," Dustin repeated, looking around at his friends who were only staring at him with raised eyebrows and incredulous expressions. "You know, '*Demogorgon*'... '*apocalypse*'... '*Demopoc*...'" He paused, then looked down. "...Nevermind. Lucas, you were saying?"

"I'm saying -"

"What the hell were you boys thinking?!" Joyce exclaimed from behind them and the boys whirled around, startled.

"*Jesus!*" Dustin exclaimed as he caught his breath.

"I told you boys to *stay* where you *were!*" Joyce continued and the boys fell silent. Her eyes were wide but her brow was fixed as she walked toward them, closing the distance between them. It wasn't often that they saw her so angry.

"Mom, I'm sor-" Will began but Joyce wasn't hearing it.

"Do you have *any idea* -" Before she could continue to scold them, sirens began to go off in the lab, ringing out across the landscape as red emergency lights flashed in and outside of the building.

"What's going on?" Joyce asked as the five of them stared in bewilderment at the once silent and inconspicuous building.

"Democalypse..." Dustin breathed.

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As Hopper's body slowly quieted, Dr. Brenner stood up, carefully pushing his own chair in with cat-like grace. Drool dribbled from Hopper's chin as his eyes lolled about and he panted, resting his forehead against the cool metal table.

"Haven't you had enough of this since your last unpleasant experience here?" Dr. Brenner said, walking a fine line between insincere empathy and thinly-veiled disdain. Hopper tilted his head to the side, still catching his breath as he recovered from the tazing. He needed to find a way out of this. He let his eyes focus on a clipboard with various documents that was resting on the edge of the table. "I seem to recall a night quite similar to this only a few months ago," Dr. Brenner continued but before he could say anything else, red lights began to flash and an emergency siren began to go off throughout the building, catching everyone's attention.

"Go," Dr. Brenner directed the guards behind Hopper and they immediately hurried out of the room to investigate the cause of the alarm. "Not you," He said to the last guard before he could leave. "Stay with him," He gestured, then said to Hopper, "We'll continue our chat another time,"

Hopper eyed his surroundings as Dr. Brenner left and the remaining guard aimlessly walked around the room. He was obviously unsure of what was going on and the sound of the alarm was blaringly harsh as it bounced around the little room.

Hopper flexed his hands against the cuffs, giving the bars of the back of his chair an experimental squeeze as he shifted in his seat. "Shouldn't you be figuring out why that alarm is going off?" He asked in a snide tone, more as a distraction than anything else.

"Shut the hell up," The guard barked back at him, kicking Hopper's chair and almost setting it off-balance were it not for Hopper's generous weight. He gave Hopper a final warning glance before

turning to look out into the hallway through the small window in the door. Hopper watched the guard's face change to a more concerned expression and knew now was his opportunity.

Within seconds, Hopper was standing with his hands cuffed behind his back and the metal chair sticking out behind him.

"Sit back down!" The guard yelled, far too late, as Hopper had already closed the distance between them. He twisted his body, using the chair as a weapon, and slammed it against the guard with a loud *thunk* several times. Doubled-over in pain, the guard reached for the gun at his belt clip but Hopper pinned him against the door and banged his head against the guard's as hard as he could. The impact was enough to knock the guard out temporarily and he fell to the floor in a heap.

Hopper quickly walked back to the table, turning his back to the edge so he could grab the stack of papers on the end. He pulled a paperclip off of one set of documents and began manipulating the metal into a straight piece of wire, then bent it to a 90 degree angle to create a makeshift key. He fumbled several times but was able to get the end into the keyhole of the handcuffs and free himself.

The chair and handcuffs fell to the floor as he shook the stiffness from his hands, grabbed the guard's gun from his belt and slipped out into the hall.

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"This is not good..." Dustin said, anxiety building in his voice. "This is *NOT GOOD!*" He all but screamed in Lucas' ear.

"I *KNOW!*" Lucas yelled, shoving him away.

"We've gotta get in there!" Mike exclaimed, waving his arms wildly as his voice cracked. Seeing the flashing red lights and hearing the ominous echo of the lab's security alarm going off was more than he could handle. His adrenaline felt like it was higher than it'd ever been and all he could think about was what could possibly be happening to El in that building. "El's still in there!"

Joyce watched the boys freak out as she clutched Will close to her side. More torn now than ever, she wasn't sure what to do and she wished Hopper was there. Despite his flaws, she knew she could rely on him and at this point, she didn't even know if *he* was safe. She wanted desperately to get inside and rescue El - she'd fostered a bond with the young girl in a short amount of time and her heart felt like it was falling apart as she thought about what could be happening to her. On the other hand, there was no clear way for them to get into the lab safely and she had to think about her son as well as his friends whom she was essentially watching over. So they stood paralyzed outside the tall barbed wire fencing as red lights reflected on the barren trees and the sound of the alarm echoed in their ears.

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El panted as she ran barefoot through the lab. She was exhausted but fear and her mother's words powered her to keep going. Lights flickered and the floor was splashed with blood and the bodies of guards at what felt like every doorway. El tried not to think about the danger she was in as she narrowly avoided slipping on her way down the hall. She wasn't sure where to go exactly but she wanted to find Terry and she needed to find a way out without running into any monsters or guards.

A loud, otherworldly shriek echoed down the hall behind her and El nearly jumped out of her skin as she looked back to make sure nothing was behind her as she continued to run. Not looking where she was going, she tripped over the leg of a researcher who had been mauled, his body an unrecognizable mass of exposed flesh, blood, and torn remnants of his lab coat. El screamed as she hit the floor hard, sliding through a huge puddle of blood that soaked through her hospital gown. She whimpered desperately as she scrambled to get back up but her feet slid in the sticky red puddle several times before she regained traction and kept running.

As she rounded the end of the corridor, she stopped short at the sight of several monsters a short distance down the hall. They looked like the Demogorgon but they were smaller and hunched forward as though they couldn't support their full body weight on just two legs yet. Now everything made sense. She remembered the pods she'd seen in the Upside Down and the baby monsters; the little slugs that

would eventually grow to become full-grown Demogorgons. Her eyes wide in terror, El took a step backwards but the monsters had already heard her. As they began to run toward her, their mouths dripping with the blood of the men who had imprisoned her, El dropped her head, narrowing her gaze at the creatures as they picked up their pace, then stopped abruptly. El maintained her penetrating gaze, holding a half dozen monsters still before throwing them all back into the wall at the far end of the hallway. She let out the breath she'd been holding as they slammed into the concrete wall and fell motionless to the floor but within seconds they were back on their feet and running toward her again. El screamed as blood trickled from both nostrils and she gripped them tightly with her mind, her hands reaching out toward them. Fueled only by a primal, desperate desire to survive, El mentally ripped them apart and their gangly, leathery limbs went flying in all directions as dark blood splattered across the white concrete walls. As the dismembered pieces of the Demogorgons exsanguinated in the middle of the hall, El cursed herself for killing them this way. She knew blood would draw even more of them here but what else could she do? There were so many of them and she was already so tired that she wasn't sure she could handle this. How could she ever escape?

El exhaled sharply, bracing herself against the wall and resting her head in the crook of her elbow as she tried not to cry. She still needed to get out. She still needed to find her mama. She couldn't stop. But just as she was about to keep going, she heard more shrieks and roars from the other end of the hall, this time much louder. Combined with the sounds of men yelling and distant gunfire, she was instantly transported back to the night in the middle school with the boys. She pushed the memory away before she could get too wrapped up and turned to run in the other direction.

"Hey!" A guard suddenly appeared at the end of the hallway in front of her, gun drawn and pointed at her. "Stop -" Before El could react, three more monsters appeared and tackled the guard, tearing flesh from bone even before his body hit the ground.

El slapped her hand over her mouth, muffling her cries as she turned to run back in the direction she'd come when one of the doors in the hall opened and she nearly slipped and fell again.

"Hey kid, get in here!" A man said and when El regained her balance and looked up, it was Freddie leaning against the wall inside the room. "Now!"

El quickly hurried into the room and Freddie slammed the door, locking it and ushering her over to the corner. He limped heavily and El looked down to see his foot was wrapped in thick bandages as he used the wall to support himself.

Freddie noticed her staring. "I'm fine," He answered her silent question. "How did you get out of that room?"

El inhaled deeply, glancing at the door and Freddie nodded. With all the mayhem happening in the lab and her apparent mental powers, he shouldn't have been surprised that she managed to escape. Now, however, they had a much bigger problem running around the halls of the lab and she'd obviously been through more hell than just the electric shocks. There was dried blood all over her face, arms, and hands and her gown was covered in blood. Her eyes were wide with dark circles and he could see the veins in her face and neck just under the surface of her skin. Judging by her apparent lack of injury, Freddie surmised that the blood was not her own but he couldn't be sure if that meant she'd killed someone or had been around someone who'd been killed.

"Damn, you look like hell," He said with a sigh and El looked down at herself uncertainly as Freddie hobbled over to the door to look out the window.

"Your name is Eleven, right?" He turned to her and El reluctantly nodded before correcting him.

"El,"

"El?" Freddie parroted. "Okay, El. We're in a lot of trouble here but I'm guessing you already know that. Did you see a way out around those things?"

El shook her head despondently. "Where is Mama?"

"Mama?" Freddie looked at her quizzically. "Who is 'Mama'?"

"Terry," El clarified and Freddie paused, thinking.

"Oh wow," He breathed once he realized who she was referring to - the same woman he and Jake had been charged with guarding when she'd first been brought to the lab. He felt sick to his stomach at the thought of how much pain and misery had been inflicted on this poor girl - and how much of it he'd been involved with in some way. "I-I'm not sure where she is now. The last time I saw her, she was in one of the patient rooms on the other side of the building but that was a while ago,"

El sighed, doleful, and Freddie felt like his guilt was eating him alive.

"Hey listen," He said, hobbling back over to where she stood, arms wrapped around herself. "We'll find her, okay? I can think of a few places they might have taken her if she's not still in the same room,"

El looked up at him, eyes glistening as she nodded. "Okay,"

"First we've gotta figure out how to get around these things, though," He looked back at the door as the sounds of yelling and shrieking reverberated down the hall. As he peeked through the window on the door, he caught sight of one of the monsters stalking past. "Holy shit," He jumped, losing his balance and catching himself on the wall. The noise, however, caught the monster's attention and it stopped walking to sniff the door. Freddie put his finger to his lips, gesturing for El to be quiet as they waited with bated breath in the hope the creature would pass by the room. Everything was silent for several excruciating moments and they assumed the monster had kept going until Freddie exhaled sharply. The monster rammed itself against the door with a loud bang, its claws scraping against the metal as it shrieked and croaked. El jumped with every impact it made, screwing her eyes shut tightly and trying to figure out what she could possibly do to get out of this as the banging got louder and more cacophonous. When the door suddenly came off its hinges and three monsters came barreling in, Freddie didn't have a chance at escape. He tried to scramble away but the room was too tight, there were too many of them, and his shattered foot didn't let him get far.

"Nooo!" El screamed in horror.

"Run, El!" Freddie yelled as the first monster tackled him to the ground and the others groaned and shrieked with excitement. "Run, *now!*"

El hesitated, frozen as the little Demogorgons tore into Freddie's torso and the life quickly drained from his eyes. As they continued to ravage his body, El regained her senses and raced out of the room as tears streamed down her cheeks. She pushed herself to run faster than she had run before, leaping over puddles of blood like a gazelle trying to escape the jaws of a lion on the Savannah. The halls were mostly empty at this point from what she could tell. Every lab employee she saw was dead or dying on the floor and her mind was in a frenzy trying to figure out what to do or where to go. Nothing felt safe.

She desperately wanted to find Terry and even as she ran, she tried to establish a mental connection, though it was no use. She was too distracted, too frantic, so she paused briefly to look through the window of every room she passed but still couldn't find her mother.

She stopped suddenly at the sound of the elevator chiming and watched as the doors opened. Her heart sank when she recognized the face of her Papa with two armed guards. He looked just as surprised to see her out of her room but he quickly recovered.

"Stop her!" He shouted and the guards bolted out of the elevator in her direction.

El turned on her heel and tore through the maze of the lab, slipping through every obscure hallway she could think of but they were hot on her trail and she was losing stamina. Her heart was pounding and her chest felt like it was on fire.

That was it.

El remembered Jonathan and Nancy talking about how they'd tried to kill the Demogorgon themselves back at the Byers house on the night they found Will. They'd somehow gotten on the subject of that surreal week in November and El could picture Jonathan and Nancy standing in the living room recounting the memory to the boys who had yet to hear about their combined effort against the Demogorgon.

"Nothing seemed to have an effect on it," Jonathan had said.

"Except the fire," Nancy had added.

That's what she needed to do. She needed fire. There were so many of these Demogorgons, though. It had to be a big fire. With a renewed sense of purpose, El pushed herself to keep running as she could hear the slight panting in the guard's breath as he tailed her. How could she get access to fire and take out the Demogorgons when he was chasing her? On the one hand, the monsters were taking out many of the guards and lab personnel, making it easier for her to escape without being caught by one of Papa's sadistic employees. On the other hand, however, the monsters didn't discriminate and they would just as quickly kill her in an instant if she made a misstep.

El continued to evade her pursuer and despite his shouts and threats, she knew he wouldn't shoot at her. Papa would kill anyone that risked killing her. In some sick way, she could feel protected knowing that he didn't want anyone *seriously* injuring her, even if it was so that he could run "tests" on her. She suddenly found herself in a large research lab with more test tubes, beakers, and other equipment than she could fathom. She didn't know what half of it was but there were several workbenches and cabinets full of supplies as well as a row of gas tanks. Just as she realized she'd come to a dead end, the guard who had been chasing her appeared in the doorway, blocking her only exit. He grinned fiendishly as he caught his breath.

"Nowhere else to run," He said, in an almost sing song voice but as he approached her, they heard a snarl from the back corner of the room.

The mutilated body of one of the scientists was sprawled across the floor and both El and the guard froze at the sight of one of the monsters slinking toward them. As it prepared to lunge, El jumped out of the way, missing the creature's claws by a hair. It latched onto the guard instead and El scrambled backwards. The guard screamed and thrashed about wildly until the Demogorgon took a bite out of the man's throat, abruptly silencing him as he fell limp to the floor.

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By a stroke of luck, the guard at the gate surrounding the lab had left

his post to investigate the cause of the emergency sirens. He was a young guy, inexperienced and overly eager, so he'd left his station with the gate locked to run up and check on what was happening. Everything had been so quiet and now it seemed like all hell had been let loose - perhaps he could help.

When Jonathan and Nancy drove up to the lab's entrance gate, they immediately noticed the alarms and lights. Neither of them needed to say a word; they exchanged wary glances at one another as Nancy plucked her backpack from the floor between her feet. As they got closer, they could see that the guard's post was empty.

"Now's our chance," Nancy said and Jonathan quickly parked along the side of the road across from the gate.

"Do you think my mom and Hopper made it inside?" Jonathan asked as he hopped out of the car and went around to the trunk to pull out their supplies.

Nancy looked back at the building, a worried expression on her face as she scanned the area. She wasn't sure what to tell Jonathan because she was concerned something had happened to them but when she saw movement in the woods, she paused to get a better look.

"I don't know about the chief but I think your mom is in the woods with our brothers and their friends,"

"What?" Jonathan replied, looking up from the trunk as he slung a duffel bag over his shoulder and stuffed a lighter into his jacket pocket.

"Over there," Nancy pointed and in the distance, Jonathan could just barely make out his mom and the four boys.

He looked over at Nancy who met his gaze. "She'll try to stop us,"

Matching his determination, Nancy nodded, "We've gotta be quick,"

The two teens jogged across the asphalt under the cloak of darkness until they approached the gate. Jonathan ducked into the guard's booth and quickly found the button to open the gate as Nancy

watched Joyce, her brother, and the other boys shout and pace far off in the woods on the other side of the metal fencing.

"Alright, let's go," Jonathan said and the two of them ran toward the building.

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Her mind was going a mile a minute but more than anything, she knew she needed to do something. The monster was blocking her only exit and once it finished with the guard, she knew it would turn around and come after her. After everything she'd been through, she knew she still didn't have the energy to fight it with her powers and even still, she knew there would be more little Demogorgons on their way. With every kill, more of these monsters were being attracted to this place.

El looked around, trying to think, and her eyes settled on a drawer labeled "supplies". El ran over and quickly rummaged through its contents until she found a spark lighter used to light the Bunsen burners on the lab benches. She remembered those burners and had seen them in use quite often during her upbringing in the lab. She could vividly picture Papa escorting her through the halls, explaining her upcoming tests and "projects" as she curiously peeked into each room they passed. She didn't know what the scientists used the burners for but she remembered that they held a device up to it and created a flame.

El grabbed one of the spark lighters and almost slammed it on the bench closest to her. Darting her gaze back and forth between the Demogorgon and the burner, El frantically clicked the spark lighter open and closed over the Bunsen burner again and again, just as she remembered the scientists doing in her memories. Frustrated and close to panicking, El dropped the lighter and went back to the drawers, hoping to find something else. She used her powers to open all of the drawers and cabinets at once so she could find something quicker and spotted a large jug of ethanol alcohol used for disinfecting equipment.

The Demogorgon was slowing down, signalling that it would soon abandon the guard and come after her next. El ran back over to the

lab bench and clicked the spark lighter as fast as she could until her hand cramped and she thought for sure that it wouldn't work. When the burner finally ignited, she exhaled sharply before grabbing the jug of alcohol from the other counter. She made sure to keep the jug as far from the open flame as she could as she tentatively approached the monster from behind. Her hand trembled as she unscrewed the lid of the jug and, turning her face away, she splashed the monster with as much as she could before its head spun around and she became its target.

El gasped as it snarled and she scrambled backwards to get away. In her haste, she dropped the jug, spilling alcohol across the floor. The monster, unfazed, approached her as she ran around the lab benches to put some distance between herself and the creature. After having almost made a circle around the benches, she was so close to the open door but the Demogorgon was also much too close for comfort. One jump and it would be on her before she stepped foot into the hallway. El's heart raced as the monster croaked and snarled and just as she saw it crouch, ready to pounce, she bolted for the door. The Demogorgon leapt across the table in an attempt to catch her but came too close to the open flame of the Bunsen burner. El stood in the doorway as the monster instantly ignited, sending a fireball across the room as the spilled alcohol ignited and within seconds the entire room was ablaze. The Demogorgon shrieked and moaned in pain as its thick skin melted under the intense heat and El watched, catching her breath as it stumbled around the room, tripping over its legs and running into table legs and shelves. El didn't realize her mistake until the monster got close to the gas tanks in the back of the room. Only a few seconds later, they exploded one by one, knocking El off her feet and sending her back into the wall where she fell unconscious to the floor.

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"Well I know what's right, I got just one life. In a world that keeps on pushin' me around, but I'll stand my ground. And I won't back down..."

49. Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now

[A/N: I wasn't sure if I'd get this done before Thanksgiving but here we are! I hope you enjoy this high adrenaline chapter! Please let me know what you think. :) And thank you to everyone for reviewing! You guys are amazing and you keep me going!]

Chapter 49: Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now (by Starship)

"I'm so glad I found you, I'm not gonna lose you. Whatever it takes, I will stay here with you. Take it to the good times, see it through the bad times. Whatever it takes is what I'm gonna do..."

.....

Jonathan and Nancy had just reached the front of the building where they could already see through the glass that several employees were dead in the lobby. The lab's alarm was deafening as they stood immediately outside of the building and from the other side of the glass, they could feel its echo resounding against the interior walls.

They peeked through the large windows as best they could, cupping their hands around their faces as their foreheads touched the glass. The linoleum floors were smeared with blood and the footprints of inhuman creatures made their stomachs turn to knots.

Sensing their mutual apprehension, Jonathan and Nancy turned to look at one another.

"You don't have to go," Jonathan said after Nancy hesitated a beat.

"No," she quickly shook her head. "No, I'm going. I just..." She looked back through the glass.

Jonathan followed her gaze as they stared stoically at the torn and mutilated bodies of men and women who might have otherwise killed the two of them for trespassing. He was about to suggest that she go back to his mom and the kids. They appeared to be safe in the woods and he didn't want Nancy to feel that she *had* to do this if she

was having second thoughts. However, before he could say anything, she was already testing the door handles to find one that was unlocked.

When the second door she tried gave in to her pull, she looked up at him with wide, blue eyes that made him feel like he was treading water in the ocean. "Ready?" She asked, propping the door open and pulling her backpack around to retrieve her gun.

"Yeah," Jonathan said, pulling out the bat and unwrapping a towel he'd secured around the nails to keep them from poking through and tearing his bag. He dropped the duffel bag on the floor and double-checked that his lighter was still in his jacket pocket. "Yeah, let's go,"

Once they were inside, they noticed the building was eerily empty and while the alarm sirens were accompanied by flashing red lights, the main overhead lights had gone out and been replaced by emergency lights. As the pair cautiously crept beyond the reception desk through a set of double doors marked "Personnel Only", the dim lighting only added to the palpable tension in the air. Nancy held her gun pointed out in front of her, cocked and loaded, while Jonathan held his bat in a ready stance. They peered around corners as they crept through the lab and as they got deeper into the building, they could hear the familiar croaking and shrieking of the Demogorgon. This time, however, it didn't sound like a single monster but rather, an interdimensional chorus that made them question the futility of their plan. Where were Hopper and El? Would they be able to find them in this massive building? What exactly were they getting themselves into?

"Everyone is dead..." Nancy whispered as Jonathan kept his eyes peeled for the slightest movement that wasn't their own.

As they approached the edge of yet another corridor, they heard a sudden rumbling above them, followed by a guttural, gut-wrenching cry. Both of them looked to the ceiling just as a series of explosions went off right above them like fireworks and the blast sent them flying as part of the ceiling collapsed over them.

.....

El...

Her voice was soft and warm like her blanket at home when Aunt Becky took it out of the dryer.

Wake up, El...

Everything was dark and she was so tired. She tried to lift her arms but nothing happened; it felt like she was weighed down by rocks.

El, you need to get up. Now!

Her voice was harsher now, more desperate, and El opened one eye to find herself in the darkness with her mother, Terry.

"Mama," El's face brightened but she didn't move to get up. She was still so tired and even the shallow water she was lying in didn't bother her. "I found you." She closed her eyes, a soft smile tracing her lips.

El, I need you to get up. Terry said, her face pained as she looked down at her daughter. El was slumped over on her side, curled up as though she were home in bed, safely snug under her favorite blanket. *You need to get out of the building. The fire is spreading and you're in danger.*

El remembered the fire. She'd started it. She hadn't meant to cause an explosion but she was glad there was fire. That meant the demogorgons would die. They'd finally stop terrorizing her and her friends. El sighed sleepily and Terry approached her, more adamant.

Sweetheart. Terry's ethereal form hovered over El like an angel. *I need you to wake up.*

I don't want to leave you. El didn't have the energy to form words but apparently in the darkness of her mind, she didn't need them.

You have to. Terry pleaded.

El tuned her out, closing her eyes and allowing her head to rest on the seemingly limitless floor of this mental vacuum. She felt so exhausted, like every ounce of energy had drained from her like the

juice from an orange. She couldn't move, but she didn't mind. She'd done enough and the monsters would die. She couldn't let them escape the lab and destroy Hawkins. She knew they would kill everyone and everything if they did - there were too many of them now and it was her fault they were there to begin with - she'd opened the gate. So she didn't mind the fire. The fire would keep them safe. Her friends would be safe and Hawkins would be safe. She just needed a little sleep to restore her energy.

El! Terry almost cried, startling El whose eyes popped open wide at the exclamation. *El, you need to wake up! You can't give up, sweetie. I know you're tired but this will all be over soon.*

What about you? El turned her head to look up at her mother, her eyes questioning and doleful.

I'll be okay but you're in danger now. Terry dismissed El's concern as she crouched down to touch her shoulder. *Remember what I told you - no matter what happens, you can always find me here. But right now, I need you to wake up.*

Too tired... El shook her head, resting her cheek against her mother's hand.

No, El. Terry corrected gently. *You can do it. Remember how strong you are.* She gently grazed the back of her fingers across El's cheek. *I need you to be strong right now, baby. I need to know you're going to be okay. Wake up, El.*

She wanted to get up but her muscles felt so weak.

El, wake up!

She just needed a little more rest.

Wake up!

Her mother's hand on her face was a silent lullaby.

.....

"El!" Hopper gripped the small girl by her shoulders, her body limp in

his hands. "Eleven, wake up!" he said more forcefully, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his wrist. "Damnit, come on, kid!"

He checked her pulse and breathing to make sure she was still alive before picking her up, her slender arms dangling over the back of his shoulder. She whimpered lightly, giving Hopper some momentary relief that she was alright before he set out to get them out of the building.

The hallway was ablaze around them and part of the floor had fallen through. The air was thick with smoke and Hopper's forehead and hair were slick with sweat as he trekked through the halls of the lab. He'd been downstairs dodging guards and monsters when the explosions went off. Most, if not all, of the lab employees were dead at this point so he felt reasonably confident that if they could get past the fire, they'd be safe. The problem was that the fire was spreading quickly and with all of the flammable materials and equipment in this building, there was no telling when or where the next explosion would come from.

Smoke burned Hopper's eyes and he blinked furiously, his brow furrowed, as he struggled to see where he was going. He almost felt like he was walking through the caverns of hell as flames licked at his ankles, framing the hallway and surrounding them in an intense, overpowering heat. The bodies of monsters and men strewn around the corridors only added to the hellish imagery.

A piece of the ceiling came crashing down only a couple feet away from them, fire quickly eating away at it, and Hopper jumped out of the way as it disintegrated into nothing. He adjusted his hold on El as her chin rested on his shoulder and her body was dead weight in his arms.

.....

As Nancy blinked, regaining consciousness, she could feel the heat from the red-hot flames making her sweat inside her jacket. Her hair was matted down with dust and debris from the ceiling collapsing and she could already feel several bruises developing across her side that would be awful tomorrow. The walls creaked and groaned ominously around her and she quickly sat up, realizing the danger

they were in.

"Jonathan?" Nancy said, her throat scratchy from the smoke in the air. "Jonathan!" Looking around, she saw the teen lying face down a few feet away from her and was instantly struck with profound dread. They were surrounded by fire on almost all sides but all she could think about was the fact that he still wasn't awake and there was a wooden beam lying across his chest.

"Jonathan, get up!" she exclaimed as she pushed the beam aside and shook his shoulder roughly. When he didn't stir, she began to panic. "Jonathan!" she almost screamed, shoving him even harder. His hair was covered in the same layer of dust that she had and his face was smudged with dirt and sweat. Her eyes brimming with tears, Nancy looked back down at Jonathan as she furiously blinked them away. "Damn it," she whimpered quietly. "I can't lose you, too..." Her voice was barely a whisper as she stifled a small sob that threatened to creep up on her. After another brief pause, Nancy screamed once more as she pushed him again and when he finally stirred, she exhaled the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

Jonathan leaned onto his side and coughed painfully. "Ugh, my head..." he groaned as he reached up to cradle the growing knot on the side of his head.

"Don't scare me like that!" Nancy admonished fiercely, burying her worry as her tears disappeared. "We've gotta get out of here."

She helped Jonathan to his feet, both of them wincing in pain as they stood up and assessed the best way to go. Neither of them were familiar with the lab's halls but with the growing inferno around them, they followed their instincts and hurried deeper into the building, away from the fire.

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El's soft murmurs alerted Hopper to the fact she was coming in and out of consciousness. He paused in a hallway that had not yet been consumed by the fire. Despite his knowledge of the lab, finding a way out when the main halls were currently engulfed in flames was a bit challenging.

"You okay, kid?" Hopper said as he slid El off of his shoulder to look at her face. Her eyelids were heavy and the eyes behind them vacant as she fell unconscious again. He caught her as her body went limp and scooped her up into his arms. "How the hell do I get us out of here?" Hopper mumbled to himself as he scanned his memory for the best route out of the lab. They needed to get downstairs and they were on the opposite side of the building as the exit. Their only option appeared to be to make their way around the other side of the building and hope they could use the staircase on that side... and that they made it out before the fire spread further or caused any more explosions.

As Hopper made his way through the halls, the thickness of the smoke in the air was becoming noticeably dense. He could tell they were getting closer to more fire and he did his best to duck down low, keeping both his and El's head out of the smoke as much as possible. His walk was cumbersome and his arms were screaming at him from the awkward position as he carried El's weight. There was blood all over the floor that he was trying not to slip in and dead bodies spaced apart like decorative plants in an office. At any moment, he knew he could run into one of those creatures or one of the few remaining lab employees but the fire seemed to be the primary danger at this time. There was no way to quantify the threats stacked against them - rather, everything was the enemy and he just needed to find a way out. Anything or anyone that stood in the way of that would have a steep price to pay. And even if he lost in the end, he would be damned if he didn't go down fighting.

The walls groaned and Hopper could hear the flickering of flames as he got closer to the end of another hall only to realize the fire had spread to this section as well. His exit wasn't blocked but beyond the wall of fire ahead of him, he wasn't sure what he would find. He could only hope they'd find a way out of the building.

Suddenly, a loud boom came from the hall they'd just passed, followed by another, and shook the floor beneath Hopper's feet. The explosion knocked him unsteady and he nearly lost his grip on El, catching her head before she hit the floor.

"H-Hopper?" Her voice was scratchy and her eyes opened only momentarily to meet his before closing again.

"I'm here, kid," Hopper said gruffly, situating her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. "We're getting out of here, don't worry."

Galvanized, he began to jog down the hall, stopping short when two familiar faces appeared around the edge of the corridor.

"Hopper!" Jonathan said, clearly relieved to see that the police chief was alright.

"Is that El?" Nancy asked, concerned as she and Jonathan quickly jogged up to him, their weapons at their sides. "Is she okay?"

"What the *hell* are you two doing here?!" Hopper exclaimed through gritted teeth.

"We wanted to help," Nancy replied. "I-"

"It was my idea," Jonathan began to explain to a clearly angry Hopper as Nancy furrowed her brow defiantly.

"Actually -"

"I don't give two shits whose idea it was," Hopper growled at them. "Which way did you take to get up here? Is it still safe to get out that way?"

"Uh, yeah, I think so," Jonathan replied quickly, jerking a thumb behind him. "The stairs down that hall were okay but the ceiling fell through downstairs,"

"El, are you okay?" Nancy approached Hopper, tentatively touching El's back and peering around to the small girl's face. Her skin was bruised and her veins visible and Nancy couldn't tell if the blood all over her was her own.

"She's in and out," Hopper explained tersely as the heat in the air began to noticeably intensify. "I don't suppose either of you stumbled upon Terry on your way up here, did you?" When both teens shook their heads regretfully, Hopper sighed, "Let's go."

Nancy backed up as the chief shifted El's weight on his shoulder and without warning, another explosion went off, this time above them.

The ceiling blew out, tossing all of them backwards like leaves in the wind as wooden beams fell from above and sent embers flying through the air like snow.

Groaning and favoring their bruises, they each pulled themselves to sitting. Thankfully, no one was seriously injured or unconscious - except for El who hadn't stirred once through the explosion. A couple more support beams had fallen and brought the fire from upstairs to this hall. Now separated by a wall of flames, they stared demoralized at the fire for a moment.

"You two go," Hopper instructed brusquely as he checked that El was still okay, albeit unconscious.

Jonathan looked up. "What about you and El?"

"We'll find a different way," Hopper brushed the question off as he shakily threw El back over his shoulder. "Just get the hell out of here before something else happens," When the two hesitated, he barked, "Now!"

Nancy threw a wary glance back at the police chief and El as Jonathan hurriedly grabbed her hand and pulled her down the hall in the direction they'd come.

As Hopper was about to turn around and try to find another detour, he stopped short at the sight of a Demogorgon approaching him and El like a lioness stalking her prey. Trapped between a wall of fire and a monster preparing to pounce, Hopper ducked into one of the laboratory rooms and set El down on the floor as quickly and gently as he could before hurrying back out into the hall just as the monster rushed him. He blocked its initial attack with his forearm, earning a sizeable gash in the process, then grabbed a broken piece of wooden and waved it in the monster's face like a torch. The Demogorgon shrieked, quickly backing up, though it didn't run away. Clearly it was torn between its fear of fire and its desire to attack.

"You want some of this, you son of a bitch?" Hopper snarled, jumping closer to the monster as he swiped the fiery weapon at it. When the flames made contact, the Demogorgon cried out in an ear-piercing scream before running in the opposite direction. Hopper exhaled with

satisfaction, his brow furrowed as he tossed the flaming piece of wood back into the fire.

"Well, Chief Hopper," A familiar voice laughed in an ironic way when Hopper returned to the lab room. Hopper blinked in surprise to see Dr. Brenner sitting on the floor on the other side of the room from where he'd absent-mindedly left El. The scientist looked paler than usual and with a quick once over, Hopper noticed the significant portion of leg that was missing from the older man. Blood pooled at the base of the wound, spreading out across the floor, and Hopper avoided looking at the torn flesh and exposed bone protruding from Brenner's knee.

Hopper quickly gathered El into his arms, watchful eyes on Dr. Brenner, though it was clear he wasn't going anywhere. He was losing blood quickly and even if he wasn't, he wouldn't be able to get far or do much with part of his leg missing.

A chill ran up Hopper's spine as Dr. Brenner chuckled to himself. "This is quite the turn of events, wouldn't you say so?"

Hopper squinted at the dying man, seething. "Where's Terry?"

Dr. Brenner looked up, half-delirious yet fully aware of what little power he still held.

"You'll never find her in time," he replied casually, his eyes fixed and cold.

"The hell I won't," Hopper barked. "Tell me where she is, you bastard or I'll make sure you die in a hell of a lot more pain than you're already in,"

Dr. Brenner only smirked, shaking his head as he looked down. "I wonder, does Eleven know about your betrayal?" he asked, looking up with a malicious glint in his eye.

"Fuck you," Hopper growled, as he hoped against hope that El was still unconscious.

"Ahh, apparently not. That should be interesting, should she ever find out," Dr. Brenner smirked to himself, recognizing the thinly-veiled

guilt in Hopper's face. "I think I understand what's been happening here all along," he said, resting his head back against a cabinet door. "Your daughter dies as a result of your negligence and fool-hardiness, then you put all your time and energy into rescuing a scrawny little nothing of a child only to betray her -" he weakly gestured to El, "-trust in doing so," Dr. Brenner chuckled and his toothy grin was deeply unsettling. "You spend your life seeking redemption for your mistakes but in doing so, you do nothing more than dig yourself deeper into this hole you created for yourself when you caused your daughter's premature death,"

"No!" Hopper shouted, furious. If he hadn't been holding El, he could have rushed over and beaten the man to a pulp, dying or not. "You killed her, you son of a bitch!"

Dr. Brenner seemed unfazed by Hopper's exclamation and his small, unceasing grin only fueled the fury raging in Hopper's chest.

"You want to kill me, too," The scientist surmised nonchalantly. "Go ahead; neither of us are getting out of this place alive."

Hopper considered putting El down so he could give this man the beating he unquestionably deserved but he held back. "No," He shook his head as he moved to go back out into the hall with El still unconscious over his shoulder. "You deserve to burn,"

.....

Mama? El could feel heat all around her, despite the cool water at her feet and the vacant darkness that surrounded them.

I'm right here, sweetheart. Terry said comfortingly, though her voice was tight and strained. She was sitting by El, her legs tucked to the side as El rested her head in her lap. *You're safe.* Terry brushed a hand over El's forehead, playing with a random curl that was still left on her head after the hack-job of a buzzcut she'd received earlier.

Where are you? El briefly opened her eyes and Terry's stoic smile made her feel warm, but in a good way.

I'm right here. Terry soothed, shushing her. *You're going to be okay.*

Rest now; you're in good hands.

El let herself sink into the softness of her mother's embrace - the gentle give of her leg under the weight of El's head, the plush texture of her robe, the smooth caress of her fingertips gently grazing El's cheek.

I'm here.

.....

She'd been handcuffed to a chair, though it'd been unnecessary at best, given her catatonia. They had planned to kill her much earlier, before the monsters escaped and before the lab had become the embodiment of hell.

Murmuring unintelligibly, she'd close her eyes and focus on her daughter. More than anything, that was what mattered to her most of all now. Despite being trapped, she could still protect her baby in the only way she was able now. Everything was so erratic until she allowed her mind to still and when she found El in the darkness, the jumbled up words and pictures and thoughts and memories fell away. Everything made sense and she was herself again - a young woman with her beloved child.

The room was already hot and she tried to focus on the sound of her daughter's voice in her mind as opposed to the imminent danger encroaching on her prison. She was in an observation room with the same familiar two-way mirror facing her but she kept her eyes closed. She didn't want to lose her connection with El.

It all happened so fast - the explosion next door and the fireball that blew through the hall, the door, the mirror, and set her room ablaze. There was no escape and she could feel the flames dancing closer and closer to her skin.

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Jonathan and Nancy narrowly made it out of the building. The fire had spread quickly and while they had a path to escape, it was narrow and quickly becoming more harrowing. Jonathan held a firm

grip on Nancy's hand as they ran, the path behind them seeming to be swallowed up by flames in their wake. The staircase had shaken with the aftershock of another explosion somewhere in the lab and on the first floor, debris crumbled and fell from the ceiling.

As they made it to the lobby, they could hear glass shattering as a result of another explosion somewhere in the building. Just before they were about to cross over the threshold, out into the safety of the parking lot, a gut-wrenching scream came from somewhere in the lab. They couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from and at this point, the flames were too high and dense to see beyond the lobby. Nancy's heart sunk into her stomach and she and Jonathan exchanged heavy glances as the woman's cries echoed through the halls until they abruptly quieted.

Swallowing back a sob and frozen in shock, Nancy let Jonathan pull her outside to safety just as another section of the ceiling fell through.

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Hopper quickly ducked out into the hall only to find that the fire had spread even more, effectively trapping them, and when he came back into the lab room, Dr. Brenner let out a gravelly laugh.

"I'm afraid I warned you," he said grimly as he coughed, catching blood spatter in his hand. "There's no way out."

Hopper furrowed his brow as he tried to think of a plan. There had to be a way out; they couldn't die here in this lab, trapped with this son of a bitch. He didn't want to admit that Brenner was right but he could hear the flames blazing outside the room and feel the smoke filling his lungs - how much of a chance did they really have?

Dr. Brenner was becoming quieter and it was obvious he wasn't going to last much longer. As Hopper reviewed his options, he started to wonder if maybe the older man had been right. Was this whole rescue attempt truly futile? Had he been living his life and making decisions all this time in an attempt to assuage the guilt he felt about his daughter? Brenner's words seeped back into his head and Hopper felt the hot coal of guilt in his stomach at the remembrance of the

deal he'd made with Brenner back in November. He'd sold the kids out in an attempt to not only rescue Will, but to save his and Joyce's skin. Sure, he'd rationalized the decision by telling himself that El was more than capable of defending them and between the four of them, they could find a way to escape the agents. But when he'd gotten back to the school after everything and learned of El's fate, he'd felt almost as sick as he'd felt the day he lost his daughter. Once again, it was his fault.

Brenner's coughing stirred Hopper from his downward spiral and he remembered the situation at hand. He remembered the girl that was still in his arms and still in need of rescue. There had to be a way.

Desperate and wild-eyed, he looked around the room. It was a basic laboratory exam room with supply cabinets, sinks, and shelves. There was a hospital bed on one side surrounded by a myriad of medical equipment he wished he didn't recognize. Suddenly, the idea struck him as though he'd been punched in the face and Hopper rushed over to a shelving unit, carefully balancing El over his shoulder as he rifled through various items. Nothing. He threw open the cabinet doors over the sink. Nothing. He crouched down and looked through the lower cabinets, pulling out a large blanket. It wasn't terribly thick but it was their best shot.

"You're wasting your time," Dr. Brenner said harshly, his voice weakening with every breath.

Hopper ignored him. This had to work and, fueled by adrenaline, he would find a way. They would not die next to this bastard if he could do anything about it.

El's arms dangled against Hopper's back as he leaned over the sink, soaking the blanket as water sloshed over the counter and drenched his boots. When the blanket was fully saturated, he pulled it over his head and around El as best he could. It was heavier than he'd been expecting so he quickly repositioned El so he could carry her in both arms, then pulled the dripping blanket over them as a shield.

Without another glance back at the dying man in the corner of the room, Hopper hurried out of the room and back into the hall. Piercing screeches echoed through the halls as the building was

consumed by fire and the monsters burned throughout the lab. Much of the interior structure of the building was exposed and metal supports behind the walls were warping under the intense heat. The hall was littered with wood beams that had fallen and caught fire. There was no telling when or where ceiling could fall through again or the floor could collapse beneath them or another gas tank could explode. They just needed to go.

Hopper stared at the wall of fire before them, gathering his courage as he pulled the edges of the blanket closer, almost completely shielding El and leaving enough open to see where he was going. Flames roared before him and monsters screamed behind him as he ran through the fire with El still unconscious in his arms.

.....

Once outside, Jonathan continued to pull Nancy farther and farther from the building as they both coughed vehemently. Nancy fell to her knees, exhausted.

"We -" Her sentence was interrupted by a series of violent coughs as both she and Jonathan recovered from smoke inhalation. "We have to go back for them," she panted and Jonathan knelt down beside her, struggling to clear his own throat.

"They'll find a way out," he said reassuringly, though he wasn't sure he believed it himself. "Hopper will find a way."

"Jonathan?!" Joyce's frantic voice was coming closer as she and the boys rushed over to the teens. "*What the hell are you doing here?!*" She was almost crying as she fell into a heap between her son and Nancy, pulling them both into a hug before pushing them away. "What-what were you *doing* in there? What is going *on?!*"

"Did you find El?!" Mike asked, barely concealing the panic that had been steadily rising in him as they'd watched fire spill out from broken windows in the lab. "Is she okay?"

"Sh-she's with Hopper," Nancy replied, still catching her breath. "But..."

Jonathan watched her hesitate and he knew why. He wasn't sure he could tell them that Hopper and El were possibly trapped and El hadn't even been conscious when they last saw her. He could barely look at his mom and the boys' worried expressions.

"But *what?*" Mike pressed, exasperated. His agitation was evident as he bounced on his heels and Jonathan could see that his muscles were tensed. "What the hell is going on?!"

Dustin tried to steady his friend with a hand on his shoulder but Mike roughly shoved him away, his face twitching as he struggled to keep his composure.

Nancy was coughing into the grass again and Jonathan was about to explain what had happened when another series of loud explosions pulled their attention back to the lab. Light flashed in their eyes as they watched the building begin to collapse under the intensity of the fire. They could feel a slight rush of wind, despite their distance from the explosions, and Mike's eyes began to water.

"No!" His voice was guttural and he moved to run toward the lab but Dustin caught him around the torso. "Let me go!" Mike bit back at his friend but he was half Dustin's size and the two struggled against one another as they watched the top floor of the lab collapse completely, initiating a domino effect as each floor beneath it caved in from the weight. "I said, let me go!" Mike almost screamed, his voice cracking as Lucas and Will came around to the front and Dustin dug his heels in, holding Mike in a bear hug.

"She's still in there!" Mike's voice was ear-splitting but his friends held tight.

"You can't go in there!" Lucas said, face to face with his friend as he freaked out. His own eyes were brimming with tears as they realized the severity of the situation. "*You can't go in there!*"

"You're letting her *die!*" Mike snapped back harshly and despite his fierce anger, tears slid down his cheeks. He wasn't thinking about what he was doing and the adrenaline rushing through his veins made him feel almost electrified. "Let me go! *I promised her! I promised her I'd get her out!*"

"*Michael!*" Joyce rushed over, pulling Mike's face up to look at her as Dustin gripped the fabric of his sleeves in an attempt to keep a secure hold around his friend. "*Mike*, listen to me," Joyce said, keeping a firm yet soft tone to her voice as her own tears spilled out from her eyes. "You can't go in there, it's not safe!"

"I don't care!" Mike replied, his voice faltering as his adrenaline waned. "I don't care!"

Behind them, the building continued to fall and in seconds, what had once been a towering, intimidating structure was now a pile of debris and rubble, illuminated by pervasive walls of fire. The alarm siren stopped and suddenly everything was quiet except for Nancy crying into Jonathan's shirt and Lucas and Will's sniffles.

Suddenly weak at the sight of what had once been the lab, Mike's knees gave out and Dustin helped him fall gracefully to the grass as reality hit them and everyone's tears began to flow freely.

Mike fell into a prostrated position, his legs tucked under him as he buried his face in his arms. Dustin, Lucas, and Will sat in the grass surrounding him as they each cried quietly. Joyce exchanged glances with the boys before pulling Will in for a kiss on the forehead and crawling over to Jonathan and Nancy to check on them.

"I *promised* her," Mike whimpered under his breath, his voice cracking in and out. "I-I never got to tell her -" he sputtered quietly, his voice muffled into the sleeves of his jacket. Their own hearts heavy and mournful, his friends watched as his shoulders shook. While it had always been obvious that Mike really liked El, the depth of those feelings was even more evident now. "- h-how I really feel - just a stupid 'crush'..." He shifted to wipe his face on his sleeves, trying so hard to pull it together but he felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. How could he lose her again?

He turned his head slightly so it was easier to breathe and Dustin could see his friend's red and splotchy face. "Wh-what if she - what if she didn't -"

"She knew, Mike," Dustin said reassuringly, patting his shoulder. "Trust me, she knew."

.....

"Let the world around us just fall part. Baby, we can make it if we're heart to heart... And we can build this dream together, standing strong forever. Nothing's gonna stop us now..."

50. Love Song

[A/N: Holy crap, I've been gone forever! Sorry guys! I totally wasn't planning on that but school got a little hectic and busy. But good news is, I'M DONE! So done. Not just on break but I'm freaking GRADUATING. Booya. This fic is getting FINISHED ASAP. Believe you me lol.

Anyway, to reply to some reviews (thank you all for the feedback and love! You guys seriously rock):

phieillydinyia: DID I?! XD Read on! lol Also, probably shouldn't let Mike go in lol

elizi02: Hopefully in the context of this chapter, the previous chapter's song makes more sense for you now.

Resisting-Moonlight: Yeah, her poor hair :(I've got serious love for the mother/daughter dynamic here so Terry's scene was a challenge

Guest: YES TO SOCCER-MOM STEVE XD

mistake: Um, okay? lol

DeusTenebris: I SO SORRY. XD

StrangerThings94: Thank you! I have, actually. I started a 4th of July one-shot last year that I'll probably end up finishing now (maybe around July? lmao) but I'm definitely open to writing more so long as I have ideas haha

: You helped bring me out of my - not funk, because it wasn't that - but you helped me get back into the ST fic zone! lol And thank you for the congratulations :)]

.....

Chapter 50: Love Song (The Cure)

"Whenever I'm alone with you, you make me feel like I am home again.

Whenever I'm alone with you, you make me feel like I am whole again..."

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Flashback

The stars seemed to shine a bit brighter in the mid-June night as Hopper stood outside the gas station, casually smoking a cigarette and leaning back against the brick wall. He'd left the house to buy a pack of smokes but in the end, the stillness of the early summer night and the clarity of the sky had seduced him into relaxing outside.

It was a Saturday night and most of his former classmates were out and about - hanging out inside the gas station, going in and out of the movie theatre across the street, or just generally walking around. There wasn't much to do in this town and that's why he was counting down the days until he left for the police academy. It still felt strange realizing that he was done with school. This was the end of a chapter of his life and while it was odd, he was more than ready to move on and get away from the suffocating predictability of Hawkins.

As he took another long drag on his cigarette, contemplating whether he wanted to head back home soon or not, the sound of someone crying caught his attention. Looking up, he saw Joyce storming angrily down the other side of the street, away from the movie theatre. His curiosity piqued, Hopper stomped his cigarette out under the heel of his boot and jogged across the street to catch up to her.

"Hey Joyce," He greeted but if she heard him, she made no indication. "Joyce," He caught her by the shoulder and she abruptly whirled around, momentarily catching him off-guard. "Hey, what's going on?" They'd dated for a while the year before but had since remained friends. He sometimes wondered why they'd broken up until he remembered that it was his own fault. He recalled the words he'd said to her during that last conversation: "I just don't feel it anymore." It hadn't taken too long for him to realize his mistake - the foolishness of a teenage boy with a limited attention span and dozens of pretty girls making eyes at him at the beginning of his senior year of high school. By the time he realized what he'd so casually given up, she was already with someone else.

"Nothing." Joyce replied sharply, avoiding eye contact. Hopper scanned

her face, recognizing the contorted expression and the tears that hung from her eyelashes like dew. He'd done that to her before and it didn't take long for him to figure out what was going on.

He looked back at the movie theatre. "It's Lonnie?" He'd meant it as a question but his tone made it sound more like an accusation. Despite all of his mistakes and regrets with Joyce, he was thankful they'd been able to maintain something of a friendship and whether she realized it or not, he still felt fiercely protective of her.

"Just leave it alone, Hop," Joyce said, defeated. "I'm going home."

"Well, what did he do?" Hopper asked, trotting to catch up with Joyce as she'd started to walk again. "You look like -"

Joyce shot a warning glare up at him and he immediately stopped his words from tumbling out. "I mean, you're obviously upset." he finished lamely but mentally patted himself on the back for not putting his foot completely in his mouth.

"Yeah, no shit." Joyce murmured under her breath and while she expected him to keep pushing the question, she was relieved that he was quiet after that. Instead, he fell into step beside her on the sidewalk and neither of them said a word as they continued down the street until they began to approach his parents' house.

"Do you want me to grab my dad's truck and give you a lift the rest of the way home?" Hopper offered, breaking their comfortable silence.

Joyce considered this for a moment before nodded weakly. They were only a couple blocks from her street but after twenty minutes of walking, it would be nice to get off her feet.

They'd maintained their quiet even as they walked up Hopper's driveway and gotten settled into the truck. He used his dad's truck so regularly he hadn't felt the need to tell anyone he was taking it out for a quick run. As the two of them settled into the front seat, Hopper absentmindedly tried to straighten up the mess he'd made of the center console. His morning commute to school usually involved several cigarettes and a snack from the gas station so the cab of the truck was a bit of a mess. Sandwich wrappers, empty bottles, paper bags and crushed cigarette packs lined the

floor and the ashtray was overflowing with butts, leaving a ring of ash around the surrounding area.

"Sorry," he mumbled, reaching over the console to collect the trash at her feet and toss it behind them.

"It's fine." Joyce breathed, her expression somewhat unreadable as he leaned back into the driver's seat.

The ride to her house was quiet and Hopper tried his damndest to keep his eyes on the road even when he heard the soft whimpers of Joyce crying again. He could tell she was trying to be quiet but with the radio off and the quiet neighborhood streets surrounding them, he couldn't help but hear her.

"Look," he said as he pulled up along the curb by her house. He shut the engine off and killed the headlights, leaving them in relative darkness sans the light from the streetlights trickling in. "I don't know what happened but..." he paused. "If Lonnie hurt you -"

"Jesus, Hop, he didn't touch me, if that's what you're thinking," she looked at him sharply, almost rolling her eyes.

"Then what the hell did he do?" Hopper asked, his patience wearing thin. While he knew Joyce well enough to know she wasn't easily pushed into anything she didn't want to divulge, it was driving him crazy seeing her like this.

"It isn't any of your business." Joyce shot back without looking at him, her hand perched on the door handle yet she didn't make a move to get out yet.

"Oh, yeah," Hopper retorted, becoming irritated. "The guy who drops what he's doing to give you a ride home when your piece of shit boyfriend fucks something up - you're right, it's not my business!"

"I didn't ask you to!" Joyce bit back, her gaze meeting his with a fiery glint. "And let's not pretend you were doing anything important. I saw you over there killing time outside the gas station,"

"Whatever, Joyce," Hopper muttered, bouncing his hands on the steering wheel out of frustration.

"God, this is familiar," Joyce groaned, exasperated as she leaned her head back on the headrest.

"What the hell does that mean?" Hopper asked her, his eyes narrowed.

"This," Joyce gestured between the two of them. "Us. Arguing over stupid shit and you being an asshole."

"I'm the asshole who tried to make sure you were alright and gave you a ride home!" Hopper shot back, incredulous. "You're a piece of work, you know that?"

Joyce opened her mouth as if to say something but abruptly closed it, launching them into a tempestuous silence as both of them tried to ascertain what was going on in the other's mind.

After a few minutes of uncomfortable quiet, Joyce was the first to speak. "Thank you,"

"For what?"

"For the ride," she explained. "For checking on me."

After all these years, he knew her - he knew their dynamic - like the back of his own hand. Even when they fought and she drove him crazy, he still had a soft spot for her. He didn't like to admit exactly how much pull she still had on him, especially since they'd broken up earlier that school year, but it was almost magnetic in the way it affected him.

"Are you sure you don't wanna tell me what happened?" Hopper asked gently but Joyce shook her head.

"No, I..." she glanced up at her house. The porch light was on and Hopper wondered if anyone was expecting her home yet. "I'll be fine." The way she said those words felt poignant and Hopper wondered if there was more to what she was saying than what was coming out aloud.

With a sigh and a shrug of his shoulders, Hopper turned to her and said, "Alright, well, listen - I... I'm here, okay? I don't have to tell you what I think of Lonnie's sorry ass 'cause I'm pretty sure you already know but just..." He wanted to tell her how much he didn't think Lonnie deserved her. He wanted her to know how much he regretted letting her go and how

he almost felt responsible for the pain she was going through right now, even if he didn't know the cause. He wanted to say he wouldn't hurt her like Lonnie but he knew he already had.

"Thanks, Hop," Joyce smiled and the light hit her eyes. Her eyes glistened and shone from the tears that never fell and for a moment, Hopper found himself lost in her smile. No matter how many girls he'd dated before or after Joyce, none affected him the way she did. It both captivated and terrified him.

Without trying, he found himself leaning closer to her. Something about the darkness surrounding him, the shadows and subtle highlights across their faces made the setting all the more hypnotic and when he realized she wasn't pulling back, his heart beat wildly with anticipation. There was a momentary shock when their lips met and Hopper's head was swimming with emotions and desire. When he felt her shift, momentarily deepening and returning the kiss, he felt almost dizzy with excitement and nervousness and relief. He reached for her, gently cupping a hand over the side of her face as he lost himself in the moment.

As quickly as it had begun, however, it was over.

"I'm sorry," Joyce said, abruptly pulling away and opening the passenger door. "I-I can't do this," He could hear the tremble in her voice and when she slid out of the truck, the door slamming shut in her wake, he fell back against his seat and dejectedly watched her scurry up to her front door.

Frustrated and crestfallen, he slammed his hands down on the edge of the steering wheel. "Shit."

.....

Present Day

Hopper's adrenaline was slowly ebbing as he stumbled away from the lab, still carrying El in his arms with the damp blanket draped over them. The fire was roaring and the screeching cries of monsters burning and metal warping seemed to echo in the quiet Hawkins air.

They'd made it through to the staircase and down to the first floor within minimal issue. The fire had been everywhere but after getting

past the wall upstairs, they'd had something of a path to escape, albeit a tight one. Flames had licked at his heels the whole way but in a way, he hadn't felt it. His only concern was El and getting out of the building. He could tell the building wouldn't withstand this much heat much longer, especially with the fire being spread throughout.

By the time they got downstairs, the lobby had been consumed by flames and as the blanket's dripping gradually lessened, Hopper didn't want to take the chance running through more fire. Months of working at the lab had finally paid off when he remembered an emergency exit around the side of the building that he'd hoped wasn't blocked. Racing around to the other side of the lobby, Hopper dipped and ducked through a few doors and fallen ceiling beams to the side exit. The metal was hot on his hands as he pushed the door open but he didn't care. Suddenly they were outside and the air was cold, sending a shock through him as he continued to get as far from the building as he could. Panting, he gently laid El down in the grass, shucking the blanket off of him in the process. He quickly knelt down beside her, putting an ear to her mouth to hear if she was breathing just before checking the pulse in her neck. She was alive. Still unconscious, but alive.

Before he could think of anything else, he heard the crumbling rumble of the building beginning to collapse and for a moment, he sat back on his haunches and watched. The floors caved in on one another and Hopper caught his breath, one hand protectively on El's shoulder as what was once the Hawkins National Laboratory became nothing more than a pile of metal and wood.

.....

Flashback

The evening had been a blur of skin and heat and adrenaline. Joyce reached out, opening her eyes when she realized there was no one in the sheets next to her. For a moment of brief disorientation, she bolted upright, wondering what time it was and where the boys were.

They're with their grandmother. It's Friday night. The realization settled into her mind like a reassuring hand on her shoulder. As she sat up, she could almost still feel the heat of his body against hers. Her lips were

swollen from being kissed and she leaned over the edge of her bed in search of the underwear she'd been wearing.

Hopper had only been back in Hawkins for a few weeks. How had this happened? She couldn't say she hadn't enjoyed it but the fact he was already gone and it was a quarter past midnight dampened the elation she'd felt before falling asleep. How long had she been out? When had he left?

They'd met at the bar earlier that evening, a semi-regular occurrence at this point. He sulked and brooded over a beer and she released all of her frustrations and disappointments with the divorce process with Lonnie. They commiserated and they found comfort in one another. That day in court had been particularly rough; Lonnie's lawyer was playing dirty and trying to paint Joyce as a bad mother. She didn't doubt that the judge would see through the ploy but being dragged through the ringer was emotionally exhausting nonetheless. Lonnie didn't even want the kids - that was the worst part. He wanted to snake his way out of the debt he'd accumulated under their name and get away with more than his fair share of their assets - not that they had much. More than anything, though, Joyce knew he was doing this out of spite and that was what took the biggest toll on her.

She hadn't been sure what prompted her but she'd invited Hopper back to her house for dinner. While she knew he was okay to drive, she'd made it a point to tell him he shouldn't be drinking on an empty stomach. Little did she know, that was more or less a regular occurrence for him. Besides, she'd told him, the kids were staying with their grandmother for the weekend and she just really didn't want to have dinner alone that night.

He hadn't put up much argument and their conversation over reheated frozen lasagna had proven to be more engaging than their bar venting. They reminisced about high school - the people who had changed and those who hadn't, the memories that made them laugh and the realizations and reflections that made them sigh. When the subject of their previous relationship came up, a palpable electricity could be felt in the air around them. Hopper recalled the night he took her home from the movie theatre and Joyce felt like a rock settled into her stomach. He'd apologized for putting the moves on her when she was obviously distraught over whatever had happened with Lonnie.

Joyce had brushed off the thought, telling him it didn't matter anymore

but she still bit her tongue before telling him what had actually spurred their encounter that night. She'd hated the fact that Hopper had been right about Lonnie but at that age, she'd still felt so torn. Earlier that summer morning, a positive sign on a pregnancy test had prompted her to tell Lonnie on their movie date. They'd sat in the car as she told him and she could still vividly recall the callousness in his voice when he told her they weren't ready for that and she should just "get rid of it". After a drawn-out yelling match between them, Joyce had hopped out of the car and angrily slammed the door shut as tears streamed down her face. But none of it mattered anymore because things were so different now.

"I really fucked up," Hopper said, exhaling through flared nostrils. His gaze was fixed on hers and she felt almost paralyzed.

"It's fine, you were trying to help," Joyce tried to reassure him but he shook his head.

"That's not what I mean," he corrected her and for a moment, the air around them seemed to still. She couldn't pull her eyes away from his and the dim lighting of the last dying bulb in the chandelier above them was like a callback to that night in the truck. She still felt something for him - she always had even after she'd moved on. Something about their chemistry, the way they clicked, felt like it would always be there.

Before she realized what was happening, he was leaning over her, one hand on the back of her chair and one on the table, effectively pinning her. His eyes, dark and clouded with the pain of the life he'd lost in the city echoed with the familiarity of the boy she'd loved in high school. Her heart raced with anticipation as their lips met and she rose slightly to meet him. This time there was no hesitation, no holding back. She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him even closer as he guided her out of the chair and her hands entangled themselves in his hair. His breath was hot on her skin as his lips traced her jawline and Joyce inhaled sharply, catching her breath as the hair on her arms and neck stood on end. She felt like she would melt if he weren't holding her up, flush against him. Hopper brushed away the loose hair that hung over her shoulders and left a trail of soft kisses down her neck that made her shiver before he returned to her mouth. He kissed her greedily, pouring every regret and hope, every memory and desire into it and as her hands ran over his back, she marveled at the way the boy she'd loved in high school had changed into the man before her.

He broke their kiss momentarily, scooping her up in a bridal carry and heading off down the hallway in search of a bedroom. He let her down on the bed gently before leaning over her, propping himself up on his forearms as he stared down at her. She was breathing heavily and the sight of the hunger in his eyes only fed the anticipation and desire growing in her.

Now alone in an empty room, Joyce pulled her sheets around her, suddenly feeling exposed as she tried to process her feelings about what had happened and what it meant to her.

.....

Present Day

With the lab destroyed and its lights gone, it was suddenly much darker outside. A few streetlights lit the gate entrance and the fire gave off its own illumination but the woods and surrounding area were otherwise cast in shadows.

Joyce, Jonathan, Nancy, and the boys were still congregated at the edge of the woods. Mike had become distressingly quiet after a couple minutes and everyone else was trying to process what had happened when Dustin suddenly perked up and squinted his eyes.

"Guys, do you see that?" He pointed across the field to the opposite edge of the lab's property. He could barely make out the movement of a figure in the distance as he nudged Lucas beside him.

"See what?" Lucas asked snappily before following Dustin's gaze and Will and the others gradually followed suit.

"It's Hopper!" Dustin suddenly exclaimed excitedly, nearly pushing Lucas over as he clambered to standing. "Holy shit, it's Hopper!"

"What?" Mike lifted his head, almost not believing.

Joyce focused her eyes on the figure as he moved closer, carrying something large with pale, gangly legs in his arms. After a moment, her eyes widened. "It is Hopper and he has El!"

Instantly, Mike was standing and the kids were running toward

Hopper with tear-stains on their cheeks and hope in their eyes.

The police chief watched them approach like a stampede of wildebeests and he paused briefly to let them catch their breath after nearly running into him. He needed to get El to the hospital to be treated but knowing she was alive gave him the flexibility to allow a brief reunion.

"El!" Mike immediately pushed his way to the front of the group, his face falling slightly as he noted her blank sleep-like expression. Hopper watched the blood drain from the already pale boy's face. "Is she...?"

"No, kid, relax," Hopper said gruffly, stifling a cough. "She's been in and out for a while but she's okay. We've gotta get her to a hospital."

"Is she okay?" Joyce asked as she caught up to the group. "Are *you* okay?" She looked him up and down. Both of them were covered in bruises, blood, dirt, and soot - it was difficult to tell just how hurt they were but Joyce noticed a nasty burn on the side of El's neck that made her wince.

"We're alive," Hopper quipped humorlessly, his voice stretched thin before he coughed harshly into his shoulder. "Did Nancy and Jonathan make it out okay?"

"Yeah," Joyce nodded vehemently, overwhelmed with relief and unaware of the way her eyes had welled up until tears overflowed down her cheeks. "Yeah, they're okay,"

"Good," Hopper replied, his voice hoarse. "Let's get the hell out of here."

.....

Despite Joyce's insistence that Hopper not drive, he'd stubbornly climbed into the driver's seat of his SUV. As Joyce and Hopper drove away from the lab, the roar of sirens could be heard approaching. The delay wasn't a surprise, frankly. It was the middle of the night in a small town and Hawkins lab had been situated in the woods, offset and almost hidden from most of the community. Hopper turned on

the siren of his own vehicle and raced to the hospital with Joyce following closely behind.

Once at the hospital, Jonathan and Nancy were treated for moderate smoke inhalation and Hopper and El were admitted. The various cuts, bruises, and burns they'd endured prompted the medical staff to run multiple tests and X-rays to ensure they didn't miss anything. Hopper, predictably, had insisted that he was fine but given his prolonged exposure to the fire, the doctors didn't want to overlook anything. El was stable but still unconscious when a nurse came by the waiting area to inform Joyce and the boys that they could visit her. Nancy and Jonathan discarded the oxygen masks they'd been instructed to keep on their faces for the past hour and the group followed the nurse back to the ICU.

"Is El gonna be okay?" Mike asked tentatively as they rounded a corner and approached El's room.

"She should be," The nurse replied, glancing over her shoulder at him with a reassuring smile. "She's starting to wake up now and we're keeping a sharp eye on her, don't worry," When the boys raced ahead to enter El's room, the nurse looked up at Joyce and added, "We're waiting on her scans to come back and we've treated her burns but she's gonna have a tough recovery. For now though, she seems to be doing well and if she stays strong through the night we'll be moving her out of ICU,"

Joyce nodded her understanding. "Thank you."

El was slowly beginning to come to moments after the boys filed into the room, surrounding her. Jonathan and Nancy stood toward the back, still taking it easy, and Joyce stood off to the side with her arms crossed over her chest and a tight, beaming smile of relief on her face.

"M-Mike?" El's lips barely moved as she murmured, her eyes half-closed.

"I'm here, El!" Mike said, shuffling to get closer to her and grabbing her hand. "You're safe. We're here. How do you feel?"

"Tired," she croaked, then erupted into a series of coughs. "Hurts."

"Here, sweetie," Joyce said, filling a paper cup with water from the sink and handing it to her. El gingerly held the cup in her hands and Mike and Dustin, the two boys closest to her, prepared to catch it if she dropped it. "You got it?"

El nodded weakly and sipped, resting her head back on the pillow with a wince. The blood, dirt, and grime had been wiped off of her face and she was wearing a clean hospital gown but the tubes in her nose and a large white bandage across the base of her neck were reminders of the ordeal she'd just experienced. She tentatively touched the bandage, curious yet afraid of hurting herself.

"It'll heal," Mike reassured her, reading her expression. "You're gonna be okay, El!"

"Yeah, and the lab is toast!" Dustin added, equally excited. "*Burnt* toast." He grinned, looking around for approval of his joke but when no one laughed, he quickly looked down.

"It's all gone," Lucas chimed in. "*The lab, the agents, Brenner -*"

"*The demogorgons,*" Will supplied and everyone nodded vehemently in agreement. "*-and the portal.*"

"You're free, El," Mike said to her emphatically, his voice quiet and purposeful. "You're *free* from that place. The bad men are never gonna come after you again!"

She looked up at him and the beaming light radiating from his smile was infectious. He looked so happy and while she wanted to match his enthusiasm, she was just so tired. Everything was a bit foggy and though she was comforted by the presence of her friends, she was exhausted and heartbroken nonetheless.

"Mama?" Her voice was hesitant and the somber expressions that befell everyone in the room told her everything she needed to know.

"We never found her, sweetie," Joyce said gently after a moment. "I'm so sorry."

Despite the tears welling up in her eyes, El nodded her understanding, causing some to trickle down her cheeks. *I found her.* She reminded herself, recalling the almost dream-like memories of her mother in the darkness. *I found Mama.*

.....

"How's the kid?" Hopper's first impatient words rolled out almost as soon as Joyce entered the room.

"She's doing well," Joyce said with a small smile. "They're keeping an eye on her but she's awake now and they think she should be good to move out of ICU by morning."

"Good," Hopper replied with a sigh of relief as he leaned back against his pillow. Joyce walked over to the edge of his bed and carefully sat down. "I keep telling these quacks I'm fine but they won't let me out of this bed until I'm 'cleared',"

"You took a hell of a beating in there," Joyce reminded gently, noting the cuts and bruises on his face and arms that were more apparent now that he'd been cleaned up. "How's the cough?"

Hopper shrugged wordlessly. "Jonathan and Nancy doing alright?"

Joyce nodded. "They needed some oxygen for the smoke inhalation but they seem fine now," She paused, looking down at the small space between them. How could she communicate everything that had been running through her mind since this crazy rollercoaster began? How could she express the relief she felt at knowing he and everyone else were going to be okay? "You worry the hell out of me, Hop... but I can't thank you enough,"

Mildly uncomfortable, Hopper tried to shrug it off. "You don't have to,"

"Everything you've done for me, my boys... El..." She looked up at him and for a moment, she wondered if he could feel the emotions welling up in her chest.

"I know." Hopper nodded, reaching over and taking Joyce's hand in his, their eyes never breaking contact.

.....

The world around her seemed fuzzy. The medical equipment, curtains, chairs, and cabinets around her had a white glow that felt like a dream. Was she dreaming? If she was dreaming, would she know she was dreaming? The shapes and colors around her began to shift, morphing and sliding out of view in a way that almost made her dizzy until everything was black and she was in a familiar place.

Looking around, she spotted her.

Mama. She didn't have to speak; her heart spoke for her.

My sweet baby... Terry's outstretched arms welcomed El into a tight embrace and El reveled in the plush softness of her mother's robe.

They stayed like that for what felt like an eternity and somehow, despite their silence, El could feel the intensity of her mother's emotions as though they were emanating directly from her heart and into El's mind. Relief. Comfort. Reassurance. Peace.

She knew Terry was gone but looking into her mother's eyes, it didn't feel like it. She let the emotions her mother was providing wash over her like a wave. The tears that inconspicuously escaped her eyes felt like raindrops washing away all the hurt. El exhaled deeply, sinking deeper into her mother's embrace and watching her tears drip onto the fabric of the robe. She didn't want this moment to end.

As though sensing her thoughts, Terry gently caressed the short, uneven hair on her daughter's head.

You'll never lose me. Her words were like the sun - golden and warm, wrapping her in comfort and drying up the rain. *I'm always with you.* She laid a delicate hand on El's cheek and the small girl looked up at her mother. *The bond between a mother and her baby can never be broken.*

.....

El awoke with a start to the sound of a page over the intercom outside. Everyone had gone home earlier except for Joyce who was asleep sitting up in a chair in the corner. Settling back down, El let

herself sink back into her pillow, imagining it was her mother's plush robe and that her arms were still wrapped around her. She wasn't sure if she'd been dreaming or if she'd really talked to Terry just moments ago. In her half-awake stupor, she wanted to believe it was real and in her heart, she clung to the emotions she'd experienced in her mother's presence. Reassurance. Peace. With a sigh, her heavy eyelids fell once again and she slipped back into sleep.

.....

"However far away, I will always love you. However long I stay, I will always love you. Whatever words I say, I will always love you..."

.....

[A/N: Wooooo! Two more chapters to go! We're wrapping up, y'all. Two things:

How'd you like Terry's wrap up? What's your interpretation? Is El dreaming? Is it real? Hmm...

ALSO: Holy JOPPER, BATMAN! I did NOT expect to get that in depth with them in the flashbacks but hey, the mood struck, I guess lol. I love their slow burn.

Let me know what you thought!]

51. Crazy For You

[A/N: Hey guys! Sorry for the delay - AGAIN. Ugh. Writer's block is killer - especially when you KNOW what you want to write. Anywho, here's a few notes and thank you's to those of you who have reviewed!

phieillydinyia - Yes! Of course I didn't! My heart isn't ready for that level of pain and suffering lol Glad you liked it!

Resisting-Moonlight - Right? That's my strongest headcanon about how her and Lonnie ended up the way they did. Thanks for the feedback! I was definitely going for the feels there.

PLASMAHOUND - I'm not sure! I do have a 4th of July oneshot in progress that I started last year. I'll probably try to finish that up but at the moment I don't have any ideas for other multi-chapter ST fics. We'll see if inspiration strikes!

gandalf537 - YOU are amazing. Thank you! :)

Guest - No, don't die! lol

The Man - Thanks for the info! I actually do a tonnnn of research for the stuff I write but apparently this is a tidbit of information I missed. Thanks for filling me in, though.

sol y luna 0428 - I LOVED that Time After Time was played in season 2! There's so much that happened in season 2 that I've either written or hinted at in my fic that I was practically screaming when I first watched it haha. Thanks for all the reviews!

deetje - Yay! Thank you! One more chapter to go on this one!

There's one more chapter to go from here! Thank you for being patient and sticking around on this crazy adventure/saga lol Things are wrapping up and I HOPE to have the last chapter done and posted soon! I hesitate to make promises but I'll do my best ;)]

Chapter 51: Crazy For You (by Madonna)

*"I see you through the smokey air. Can't you feel the weight of my stare?
You're so close but still a world away..."*

.....

One Month Later

"Dude, cut it out!" Lucas snapped, smacking Dustin's hand away as Jonathan snapped yet another inopportune photo.

"Enough of the bunny ears," Jonathan half-heartedly chided with a laugh. "Let me at least get *one* good shot."

It was difficult enough fitting the entire group into the frame and everyone's cheeks were beginning to hurt from smiling for so long.

"Yeah, I'd like to actually *dance* sometime before I'm *forty*." Trish quipped snarkily to which Dustin made a face.

"Okay, one more!" Mike called out impatiently and Jonathan quickly counted down before taking the final photo.

"Got it."

"Finally." Lucas muttered as the group dissipated from their huddled cluster.

They'd only arrived at the dance a few minutes prior when Jonathan and Nancy had pulled them over to get their pictures taken *before* dancing. Jonathan had been recruited to take the official Spring Fling photos for all of the middle school students and Nancy had volunteered to help with chaperoning. She periodically helped out at the punch table but had already spent a good portion of the night helping Jonathan corral kids in for their photos. The room was decorated with paper flower cut-outs and more pink, yellow, green, and blue balloons than El could have imagined. A huge banner that said "Hawkins Middle Spring Fling 1984" was stretched across the length of the entrance to the gym and the walls were lit with a myriad of colors that made El feel like she was walking through a dream.

Despite the distance from home, Trish, Gabby, and Emma hadn't

hesitated at El's invitation to come to the dance. After everything that had happened the month prior, Hopper and Joyce had continued to make efforts to keep El in contact with her new girl friends and whenever Emma's parents were able, they'd drive the girls down to Hawkins for the occasional weekend sleepover.

El was still living with Hopper but they'd been spending a lot more time at the Byers over the past few weeks so in a way, El almost felt like she had two homes again. She definitely didn't mind, though; she loved spending time with Joyce and drawing with Will. Sometimes she wandered into Jonathan's room and studied the newest photos he would hang before deciding on a place for them. Hopper and Joyce talked a lot which gave her plenty of time to explore and do whatever she wanted and Will was usually content to quietly hang out.

"Mike. El. Hang on a second," Jonathan called the two back as their group dispersed. "Do you want one of just the two of you? For that frame?"

"The frame?" Mike asked blankly before recognition flooded his face. "The picture frame! Oh yeah! Yeah, that'd be great. Right, El?" He grabbed her hand excitedly, guiding her back over in front of the dark grey backdrop before nervously dropping her hand and wiping the sweat from his palm.

"Okay." El nodded with a small smile as she played with the ruffled skirt of her satin dress. It was an electric shade of blue and El couldn't help herself from running her hands across the smooth fabric.

Nancy stood by Jonathan, smirking as her boyfriend encouraged the two to get closer. "Come on, Mike," She teased. "Act like you like her!"

"Can you *not*?" Mike glared past the camera at his sister, one awkward arm around El's shoulder and a cavern of space between them.

"Come on, guys," Jonathan said, his eye still in the viewfinder as he waited patiently.

"Tell your *girlfriend* to *shut up*!" Mike barked and Nancy barely

concealed her laugh.

"El, tell your *boyfriend* to *loosen up!*"

Mike's cheeks visibly reddened and El could sense how flustered he was becoming. "Mike," She turned to face him and the proximity of her face so close to his quieted him immediately. "It's okay." She raised her eyebrows, offering him a reassuring smile that always seemed to make him forget about everything around him, if only for a little while.

"There we go," Jonathan said, taking a shot as soon as the two preteens settled into a more relaxed pose. "That was a good one."

"Why do you have to be here anyway?" Mike rolled his eyes at Nancy as he and El passed.

"I asked Mom the same thing when you were born," Nancy quipped with a good-natured smirk as Dustin, Lucas, and the others guffawed at her comeback.

Mike groaned in exasperation but continued to walk back toward his friends with El right behind him. Gabby was dancing in place despite not being on the dance floor. Their little group was congregated at the edge of the gym, still near the entrance, and as Gabby moved and bopped to the beat, El couldn't help thinking her friend seemed to have limitless energy.

"Yes!" Gabby cried out in elation as the music shifted into a new song. "Madonna!"

"Oh brother," Trish rolled her eyes, crossing her arms. "I'm gonna try and snag us a table. Come on, Emma."

Trish led Emma down the length of the gym while the rest of them stared in bewilderment at Gabby as she sang along to the lyrics.

"Do you want to go find a table, El?" Mike asked, his voice gentle and quiet as it often was when he spoke to her. He still couldn't believe that she was really here. She was living in Hawkins and they didn't have to hide anymore. It felt surreal but at the same time so reassuringly, overwhelmingly *normal*.

"Okay."

Mike offered his arm to El and she stared at it in confusion. "You're supposed to take my arm," He explained and, still uncertain, El awkwardly grabbed his forearm and elbow in her hands.

"What do I do?"

Mike chuckled. "Not like that," he said, linking her arm through his and returning his palm to a resting position over his stomach. "Like this. See?"

El nodded her understanding as Mike led her through the throngs of students. He was still a little nervous about blatantly showing affection around other people but El's reassurance and quiet acceptance of his awkwardness was more than enough to help him move past how weird he felt sometimes.

The music was loud and El could feel it in her feet as they walked. She liked "taking" Mike's arm, though. It wasn't so different from how she often clung to his jacket sleeves when they walked or rode together on his bike. Even as she became more comfortable with life outside of the lab and hiding, she still felt just a tiny bit safer when Mike was around.

Lucas and Will followed along behind Mike and El as Dustin and Gabby slowly pulled up the rear. Gabby was still dancing as she walked, waving her arms animatedly as she sang along. Somewhat mesmerized by Gabby's performance, Dustin paused several times to stare.

"What are you *doing*?" he said to her, taking note of the way several of his classmates stopped to stare at her as well. She didn't seem to care, though.

"I think that you're afraid to look in my eyesss," Gabby sang, dramatically acting out the words as she and Dustin continued to follow their friends to the other end of the gym. *"You look a little sad boy, I wonder whyyy..."*

"This is not happening," Dustin mumbled to himself, trying to avoid

looking at her as she grinned at the reaction she was getting.

"I follow you around but you can't see," Gabby trotted to keep up with a mildly embarrassed Dustin who, despite his best efforts, couldn't stop himself from looking back at her. *"You're too wrapped up in yourself to notiice. So you choose to look the otherr waayy!"* She raised her eyebrows pointedly at how fitting that line was at that given moment.

"Kill me now," Dustin said with a deadpan, looking up at the ceiling as their group paused to squeeze through a tight crowd. "Just kill me now."

"WELL I'VE GOT SOMETHING TO SAY!" Gabby sang more vehemently, lightly gripping Dustin's shoulders and making him jump.

"Jesus!"

At that, Gabby couldn't help but erupt into laughter as they all finally circled around a table Trish had scored. "Let's go dance!"

Dustin turned to her, one eyebrow raised as he pointed to his chest and looked around exaggeratedly.

"Yeah, come on!" Gabby said, still grinning in a way that left Dustin in a combination of paralyzed terror and mesmerized curiosity.

Dustin looked back at their friends who had minimal responses. Trish held her hands up as if to say 'she's all yours' and Lucas chuckled as he leaned over the back of his chair.

"I don't, I-"

"Come on, it'll be fun." Gabby said, grabbing Dustin's hand and gently pulling him back out into the crowd.

Lucas raised his eyebrows at his friend several times as Dustin mouthed, 'I'm scared'.

"Hey El," Mike said, standing up. "I'm gonna go get some snacks. Do you want anything?"

"Eggos?" El requested hopefully but Mike shook his head.

"They probably don't have those here," he said regretfully. "Don't worry; I'll bring back something good. One sec."

"They look like they're having fun," Will commented, nodding to Gabby and Dustin out on the dancefloor. In a sea of students, the two had seemed to let loose. This wasn't unusual for Gabby who was dancing with enough energy and enthusiasm for both of them; however, even Dustin couldn't help the smile that frequently spread across his face as she moved in circles around him.

Trish chuckled. "The poor guy never stood a chance," she said, shaking her head with a smirk.

Lucas glanced over at her, noting the fact that the majority of their group was just sitting. "Why aren't *you* out there? Weren't you saying a minute ago how you 'want to get out and dance before you're *forty*'?"

Trish met his gaze and sized him up. "What, are you offering, Sinclair?"

Taken aback, Lucas blinked. "Wh- No! No, I was just -"

"Hmm," Trish squinted, then rolled her eyes. "Good, 'cause you're SOL if you think I'm dancing with you."

Mildly offended and not quite noticing the hint of a smirk on her face, Lucas exclaimed, "*Good*, because I wasn't *planning* to!"

Will and Emma exchanged weary expressions just as Mike returned from the snack table.

"Here, El," he said, putting a cup of punch and a plate piled high with popcorn, pretzels, and chips in front of her. "I thought we could share?"

El nodded happily before eagerly shoving a handful of chips into her mouth. She returned her gaze to the students out on the floor as she chewed, fascinated by the scene in front of her. She'd been just as entranced by her last school dance but somehow this one almost felt

like a re-do. There was no government lab searching for her, no one to worry about chasing or hurting her and her friends. Everyone was healthy and things had been so stable for the past few weeks that she wondered if real life - a real, *normal* girl's life - could be this simple.

After a couple songs and another trip to the snack table, a slower song began to play and the mood in the room shifted as some students left the dance floor and others entered.

"Do you wanna dance?" Mike leaned in to El, his voice low and soft as El stuffed the last few chips into her mouth.

El beamed up at him before wiping salt from her lips and nodding. "Yes."

As Mike took her hand and led her out to the middle of the crowd, Gabby and Dustin had stopped dancing. Notably awkward, they had difficulty maintaining eye contact.

Trying hard to control my heart...

"The song changed," Dustin said dumbly. As odd as Gabby was, he was beginning to really like it. Even if he didn't want to admit it outright. It was a good oddness; she was fun and they had things in common... besides, they were all a little bit weird, weren't they?

"Yup," Gabby nodded, pursing her lips. "Do... you want to keep dancing?" She looked up at him and Dustin felt like a surge of electricity had run through him.

I walk over to where you are...

"Not if you don't want to," he replied, almost tripping over his words. "Or if you - you know?"

"I do," Gabby nodded, a small grin emerging from her uncertainty.

"You know? Or you want to keep dancing?" Dustin asked, watching with wide eyes as Gabby stepped forward again.

"Both." She shrugged, her grin fully formed now.

Eye to eye we need no words at all...

A few feet away, Mike and El had settled into a familiar stance. They'd gotten most of their butterflies out during the Valentine's dance in Clarksville so they were much more comfortable this time around. El's arms rested delicately over Mike's shoulders, her fingers lacing behind his head, and Mike had placed his hands at her sides. He was still a little stiff in his movements and hand placement but his face was relaxed and he couldn't help but smile.

"Are you having fun?"

El nodded, her omnipresent smile never faltering. "Lots of fun."

Slowly now we begin to move...

"I'm glad," Mike said, inhaling sharply with surprise as El leaned forward to rest her head on his shoulder. It was a little awkward since they were close to the same height but somehow it still seemed so perfect.

Every breath I'm deeper into you...

As they swayed, slightly off-balance by El's positioning, Mike tried to compel his heart to stop racing. It bewildered him that his infatuation with her could still leave him reeling.

Soon we two are standing still in time...

El's hair was growing fast. From his vantage point, Mike could see that even the places where the lab had re-shaved her were starting to quickly grow back. Joyce had taken El to the hairdresser to have it fixed shortly after she was released from the hospital but El had refused to let the stylist take much off. Instead, they'd blended in the areas they could and turned it into a pixie cut reminiscent of Mia Farrow.

If you read my mind, you'll see...

"Your hair is getting longer," Mike blurted out, his thoughts becoming words before he realized he was thinking out loud.

This caught El's attention, causing her to lift her head and subconsciously reach for her hair. Mike internally sighed with disappointment at the loss of contact.

"Still short," El assessed, running her hand back and forth over her head as the hair's flopped back and forth with the movement. Her fingers lingered at the places where the hair was still growing back from being haphazardly buzzed.

"Yeah," Mike admitted. "But it's definitely gotten longer since a month ago. And *definitely* since I first met you," He shrugged, then remembered how self-conscious she'd been when she lost the blonde wig and abruptly added, "But it's not a big deal. Unless you want long hair. You... um... look nice either way I just noticed because I was... all I could see was the top of your head so I noticed it and..." He grimaced, forcing himself to stop talking as he realized how stupid he was sounding but El didn't seem to mind. In fact, her lips curved into a small smile and she reached for his hair. The sensation of her hands gently playing with and rolling his dark locks in her fingers sent a chill up his back that he forced himself to ignore.

"Pretty," She said definitively and Mike flushed.

"Uh, El, you don't um... boys aren't "pretty"," He explained, scrunching his face awkwardly and doing his best to hide his embarrassment. It wasn't like she knew, right?

El nodded. He was right. What was the word Trish and Gabby had used to describe boys that they thought looked good? Warm? No, that wasn't it... "Hot," She corrected but this only perplexed Mike more and his flush spread from his cheeks to his neck.

"Uh..."

Gabby and Dustin could barely look at each other as they danced and both were uncharacteristically quiet. With enough space to fit another person between them, they swayed stiffly to the music. Occasionally their eyes would flit up to glance at one another or they'd make a casual remark to try and deflect their nervousness with humor. It wasn't until Gabby overheard Mike and El that the tension between her and her dance partner melted a bit. By sheer luck, she'd

been facing the pair just at the moment El had reached for Mike's hair and said "Hot".

"Oh my god," Gabby barely stifled her laughter, throwing her head back before tossing it forward.

Dustin blinked in surprise at the sudden exclamation. "What?"

Gabby opened her mouth to answer but another round of laughter came out as soon as she inhaled. Shaking her head, she compelled herself to pull it together. "I just love El."

"Oh," Dustin quirked an eyebrow, feeling like he was clearly missing something but he shrugged it off. "Yeah, she's great."

As the music became more repetitive, signalling its impending end, Mike and El settled back into a comfortable rhythm. El couldn't stop herself from smiling and the muscles in her face almost hurt from holding the same expression so long. How was it possible to feel this happy?

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"I'm crazy for you... Touch me once and you'll know it's true. I never wanted anyone like this, it's all brand new..."

52. Blackbird

[A/N: AHHHH THE FINAL CHAPTER! I can't believe this day has finally come! Holy crap! Thank you to everyone who has followed along on this crazy journey! I can't BELIEVE how long this story ended up getting but I'm sooooo so happy I was able to finish it!

I really hope you guys like this final chapter and once again, thank you for all of your reviews and encouragement! This wouldn't have gotten finished without you guys inspiring and prompting me to keep going. :)

P.S: I'm thinking about maybe setting up a Spotify playlist with all of the songs from this fic? If you'd be interested, let me know and I'll do it! I'll make an announcement on my tumblr whenever it's up - muffinlove03]

Chapter 52: Blackbird

"Blackbird singing in the dead of night... take these broken wings and learn to fly..."

.....

It wasn't often that Joyce had the night off. No kids, no work, and all the time she could want to relax and recuperate from the craziness of the work week. The days seemed to bleed together with the same routines replaying on a loop so having a few hours to slow down and regroup was a precious commodity.

"You're sure you don't need a hand in there?" Joyce called out to the kitchen where a series of metal clangs caused her to raise an eyebrow.

"It's fine, just start the tape," Hopper replied. "I hate sitting through previews anyway," he added as an afterthought.

They'd rented a movie for the night as a way to take advantage of the fact that the kids were occupied with the dance for the evening.

Jonathan and Nancy were at the school chaperoning so they could relax for a few child-free hours.

Ever since the fire, Hopper and Joyce had been spending more casual time together. There were no emergencies, no missing children or secret government agencies to hide from or conspire against. Still, neither of them had spoken aloud the invisible tether that was slowly but steadily binding and pulling them together. It was almost as if the whole dynamic would disappear in a cloud of smoke if either of them put it to words. So they let things happen naturally, albeit slowly, and over the past few weeks, they'd fallen into a rhythm.

Hopper and El spent a lot of time at the Byers house these days. El always loved the chance to see Joyce and hang out with the boys; Hopper certainly didn't want to be the one to limit how much or how often she could be surrounded by the surrogate family she'd found in Hawkins just a few short months ago. Not anymore, at least. However, he couldn't say his motivation was entirely selfless. There'd always been something pulling him toward Joyce and while it'd lay dormant for years, the past few months were blatant evidence that nothing had really changed.

Still, he didn't want to screw anything up. Again.

More clangs from the kitchen as the oven door shut and something plopped onto the top of the stove. Joyce could smell the faint scent of something that had burnt. She was no star chef herself but still...

"Are you *sure*?" she called out hesitantly, unable to hide her smirk as she absent-mindedly watched another movie preview on the screen.

"Yup, be right there."

As Hopper entered the living room, oven mitts up to his elbows and a large plastic TV dinner tray in his hands, Joyce couldn't help but chuckle at how *domestic* this usually burly and rugged man looked. There was tomato sauce splattered on his jeans and the tray of lasagna was dark around the edges. One side of the tray had cheese and sauce spilled over the edge, partially wiped clean after whatever debacle had happened in the next room. Joyce could only imagine what her kitchen looked like but it wasn't often she was given the

opportunity to pass the dinner-making reins off to someone else for a night. And even if it was half-burnt frozen lasagna, it was the thought that counted.

"Hot, hot, hot," Hopper muttered as Joyce, taking the hint, quickly grabbed a pair of wooden tray tables and set one up by the couch. Hopper set the tray down and exhaled, seemingly relieved that the whole mess of "cooking" was over.

Joyce was doing her best to keep from laughing as Hopper yanked the mitts off. "Don't say a word."

"Oh, I'm not," Joyce said, putting up her hands as her grin widened. "Everything alright in there?"

"I'll clean it up," he answered, moving the table so he could sit down.

As the movie's title sequence appeared on the screen, Joyce grabbed the remote and paused it. "Should I get us some forks?" she asked, assessing the tray of lasagna and the otherwise barren table.

"Shit," Hopper sighed, lunging forward to pull himself to standing. "Hold on."

Joyce sat patiently, one elbow resting on the back of the couch as Hopper retrieved their silverware.

"Should I grab plates?" he called out and Joyce considered before replying. Did she really want more dishes to wash later?

"No, don't worry about it," she said. If she was having dinner cooked by a bachelor for the night, she might as well eat like one, right?

That felt strange - thinking of Hopper as a *bachelor*. But why?

"Alright," Hopper said, entering the room again and handing her a fork. "I know it doesn't look that great but if it tastes like crap, you can blame Stouffer's, not me."

"I'm sure it's fine," Joyce said, moving the tray table so Hopper could sit back down. "You didn't have to do all this."

"Nope, no more of that," Hopper said dismissively. This wasn't the first time tonight she'd made a similar comment. "It's the least I can do, hanging around here all the time and leaving El with you when I'm at the station..."

"Hop, you know that doesn't matter. She's welcome here even if you *aren't* working."

"Yeah, well," he said, unable to come up with a quick retort. "Just eat your dinner before the burnt part gets cold, too."

As the two settled in to watch the movie, taking turns at the lasagna, neither could believe just how *right* this felt. Though they both hesitated to verbally acknowledge what was happening between them, everything about their relationship seemed to be falling into place seamlessly. It'd taken a couple decades, but somehow it felt like they were exactly where they were supposed to be. The only thing keeping them from moving forward was the fear that it could all be a mirage and the slightest variance from their current pattern could cause one or both of them to awaken and realize it wasn't real.

Still, it was hard to deny what was building between them. While each had their own reasons to doubt, their chemistry was self-evident and there was no mistaking that they both cared deeply for one another. How deep those feelings ran, however, was the question.

After eating her fill, Joyce left her fork next to Hopper's in the now-empty tray. His eyes fixed on the screen, it would have appeared that Hopper's attention was focused solely on the movie. However, he maintained peripheral awareness of Joyce's movements as she settled back into the cushions. Stretching his arms out across the back of the couch, he waited for her next move. It was a game they played, an interpretive dance of intentions and questions that had gone on for weeks, if not months. Sure enough, Joyce wordlessly followed his lead, sinking into the space beside him, her body heat warming his side. What he didn't expect, however, was for her to lean farther into him, resting her head slightly against his chest. This was new, a chess piece he had yet to see come into play on the board. And when her hand rose to rest gracefully on his side, it was as if it had belonged there all along.

.....

"Okay, okay," Dustin said, laughing at himself more than anyone else was. "I got another one,"

"Oh my god..." Lucas said, rolling his eyes in exasperation as their group walked around outside. They were headed for the bus loop where Emma's sister would be picking her, Trish, and Gabby up to go back to Clarksville. The dance was over and a lot of kids had already gone home but Jonathan and Nancy were still packing up and Dustin's mom had yet to arrive to pick up Dustin and Lucas.

"El, this one's for you," Dustin said, undeterred by his friends' groans. "On a scale of 1-10, where do you think you rank?"

El looked from Dustin to Mike to the others with a puzzled expression.

Trish clapped a hand to her forehead. "For the love of - she's an *eleven!* Can we stop with the corny jokes now?"

"*Thank you!*" Lucas exclaimed with an exaggerated wave of his arms. "I should have hidden that stupid joke book."

Dustin wagged a finger at Lucas. "You leave that book alone!"

"*Make me,*" Lucas challenged and the two boys started a shoving match that continued even as they walked toward the bus loop.

"Boys are so stupid..." Trish muttered as they stopped in front of a large tree a few yards away from the loop. There was a small fountain covered in leaves and buds from the trees as well as a wooden bench to which the girls immediately flocked. They could clearly see the bus loop from this distance so whenever Emma's sister arrived, they'd be ready.

"Is that your sister's car?" Gabby asked, struggling to peer through the distance in the dark.

Emma looked up. "Yup, that's her."

As the girls stood, El took turns hugging her friends good-bye.

"See you later, El."

Gabby's gaze drifted to Dustin, whom she caught staring at her before he quickly averted his eyes.

"See ya later, dance partner," Gabby said playfully as she followed Trish and Emma to the loop.

"Yeah, bye," Dustin replied curtly, his expression betraying his attempts at disinterest.

Lucas and Mike exchanged glances as Dustin looked up at them.

"What?" he demanded, looking between them. "*What?*"

"Nothing," Mike shrugged nonchalantly, then turned to Will. "How long do you think Jonathan's gonna take to get his stuff together?" He tried not to react too much as El linked her arm through his and snuggled up against his shoulder. The air was a bit crisp and her light spring jacket wasn't cutting it after dark.

Will shrugged, digging a handful of popcorn out of the cup he'd taken from inside. "I dunno, probably not *too* long."

Eyeing the cup, El focused her energy on the popcorn inside and almost instantly, kernels were floating out of Will's cup and over to El where she caught them on her tongue like snowflakes.

"Hey!" Will laughed, clapping a hand over the cup. "Stop it!"

El laughed as she chewed, then returned her head to Mike's shoulder, a smile of satisfaction on her face. "It's cold," she said, pulling Mike tighter as she shivered, though it was impossible for them to get any closer than they already were.

"Sorry El, do you wanna go back inside?" Mike said, unable to actually look at her since her face was nearly buried in his collarbone. "Or you could have my jacket if you want?"

Never one to turn down clothes from Mike, El nodded quickly, stepping back to allow Mike to slip out of the light suit jacket he'd been wearing. It fit El like it was made for her, though the sleeves

were a bit too long, and she returned to her place at his side. As she got comfortable, she couldn't help but stare up at the sky. There wasn't a cloud to be seen and the stars shone brightly against their blue-black backdrop. She didn't notice Mike's eyes constantly flicking down toward her or the way he tried in vain to minimize his nervous shuffling.

Dustin couldn't help but grin at the awkward yet enamored expression on his best friend's face. It was nothing new but it had yet to stop amusing him.

"Hi, I'm Mike," Dustin playfully mocked. *"I don't know what I'm feeling but there's a lot of it!"*

Lucas gave Dustin a light shove. *"You should talk. I saw you and Gabby out there on the dancefloor tonight."*

Momentarily caught off-guard, Dustin deflected. *"Yeah, and?"*

"Yeah, and?!" Lucas mimicked and the two exchanged a series of pointed looks before dropping the subject, only to find that Mike and El had disappeared.

Up in the highest limbs of the tree, hidden by the coniferous branches, El had levitated herself and Mike into a better position to see the stars.

"What the hell are you guys doing up there?" Lucas shouted from below, having realized where they had to have gone.

Mike looked down warily. They were awfully high up and he couldn't see the ground through all of the criss-crossing branches and pine needles. "What are we doing up here?" he almost whispered, though unintentional.

El pointed through a hole in the branches to the sky above. Mike hesitated to tilt his head all the way up - he was still feeling a bit of vertigo - but if he fell, he knew El wouldn't let him hit the ground.

"Stars," El breathed, as if the word alone encapsulated every possible reason she could have for wanting to slip up to the tallest sturdy branch she could find. Rather than following her gaze, Mike stared at

the enigmatic girl next to him, simultaneously bewildered and amazed. When she looked back at him, however, he quickly looked away.

"Mike?" she said quietly and her voice immediately pulled his eyes back to hers. He watched her chew on her lip for a second, her brow furrowed in thought. Or was it nervousness? He'd always been best at reading her subtleties but he was a far cry from an expert. "Remember... the cafeteria?"

Mike furrowed his own brow for a second, before his eyes widened with hesitant realization. "Um, what about the cafeteria?" he almost squeaked.

"The thing..." El replied quietly, looking up at him and making him feel like his head would have been spinning even if he'd been standing on solid ground. "Mouth to mouth? What...what was it called?"

"Oh, *that*..." Mike said, filling the space between them with extra words because the weight of what she was saying or at least *implying* was enough to make him feel like he was falling. "Uh, that was... that was a um, a *kiss*..."

"Kiss," El parroted, and somehow hearing *her* say the word was even more overwhelming. After a brief pause, her own heart racing and toppling over itself in her chest, El looked back at him. "Can we?"

Dumbstruck, Mike swallowed hard even as he leaned forward. El had already closed her eyes, somehow innately trusting that she wouldn't fall as the gap between them dwindled. When their lips finally met, it was as if shockwaves had been sent through Mike's body and he suddenly felt breathless and almost giddy. It only lasted a moment but as they pulled away, their smiles were infectious.

"I like that." El declared softly, almost bashful as Mike pursed his lips to try and hinder the way his smile threatened to take control of his entire face.

"Yeah, me too."

Feeling emboldened, Mike draped an arm around El's shoulders as they looked off through the gap in the branches at the sky above. They could hear Dustin and Lucas down below, shouting across the school yard at whom they could only assume was Jonathan and Nancy finally on their way out of the school. Still, that didn't matter for now. If for only a couple short minutes, they were swept up in the excitement and elation of being together and simply being able to enjoy *that*.

There was no one to run from, no need to hide, and especially for El, the ability to feel safe was a rare treasure she'd never realized could feel so incredible. She was surrounded by people who loved and cared about her. She had friends, a family, and Mike - a life she had never fathomed as a possibility until the week he and his friends found her in the rain, changing everything forever. The bad men were gone. The monsters were gone. Soon enough, she'd be able to start school and really *act* like a *real girl*. The idea of it was unbelievable. She'd spent her life in cages and here she was sitting in a tree with the boy who rescued her from the bad men and took her in out of the rain. She'd grown up with a Papa who used her for her abilities and now she had Joyce and Hopper and the rest of her friends' parents who all seemed to like her. She'd gotten to know her real Mama and her Aunt Becky and even though they were gone, she could still feel their love for her in her heart. The world was still huge and confusing and scary at times but it was also amazing and beautiful. She couldn't wait to explore it even more.

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"Blackbird singing in the dead of night, take these sunken eyes and learn to see... All your life, you were only waiting for this moment to be free..."

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THE END.